



Do Brand Coolness and Brand Romance Synchronize with Sustainability? Insights from a Mixed-Method Approach

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Abstract:	

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Do Brand Coolness and Brand Romance Synchronize with Sustainability? Insights from a Mixed-Method Approach

Purpose: This study aims to analyse the synchronization sustainability has with coolness and how promotion of sustainable fashion can be dealt in an ameliorate way. It also provides insights to the fashion brands on how they can engage customers through brand coolness and romance for meliorated bottom and top lines.

Design: It employs mixed-method approach through the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. For qualitative part, data is garnered through in-depth interviews (n=23) with sustainable brand owners, marketers, academicians, bloggers and influencers having different roles to play in the strategizing sustainability, slow fashion and consciousness amongst Gen Z. On the other hand, quantitative data is collected from apparel shoppers (n=688) through structured questionnaire.

Originality: When there is dearth of literature on the association sustainability has with coolness, the present study holds originality in adding to the literature on the pertinent aspect. Besides this, present study addresses the lack of an academic understanding of literature on sustainable fashion in its own way through conduct of in-depth interviews with experts working in the area of sustainable fashion and then validating the same by surveying the Gen Z buyers of sustainable clothes.

Findings: The qualitative data transcribed is analysed through NVivo and findings received in this regard limns that sustainable fashion to be embellished as cool. Moreover, brand coolness has relationship with sustainable fashion, emotional attachment factor such as brand romance affect purchase intention of sustainable fashion clothing. Furthermore, brand romance is identified as a mediating variable between brand coolness and purchase intention of sustainable clothing.

Practical Implications: This research attempts to develop an understanding of sustainable fashion so that brand managers can face the present challenges in a better way. The findings in this attempt of ours suggest that the sustainable fashion can be better employed only when both customers and brands are acting responsible. To make customers purchase the brands the organizations must connect consumers through coolness and romance towards their brand.

Limitations: Limitations of the study is that with a structured interview, the respondents could not be asked to freely associate “anything related to cool”, rather they were directly asked to “define cool” and tell whether “they think sustainability in fashion can be stated as cool”. Without this constrain, the result could have been possibly being different. Moreover, the participants for the quantitative study were from developing countries which leads to limited generalizability of research findings.

Keywords - Sustainable fashion, Brand coolness, Brand romance, Purchase intention, Sustainability, Mixed method.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is currently a top corporate concern for many stakeholders, according to Kim *et al.* (2020), and Wang *et al.* (2019) it has become a worldwide issue. Since the fashion sector is thought to have one of the worst effects on the environment so industries are attempting to reduce its impacts (Maratos, 2023) as achieving sustainability success has become a top goal for organizations (Shrivastava *et al.*, 2021). Although research on sustainable fashion is still in its early stages, current data indicates that consumers are likely to select ethical forms of consumption (Pangarkar *et al.*, 2021). According to market research, younger customers are showing a growing interest in ethical and sustainable purchasing behaviours while making purchases (McNeill and Venter, 2019). Sustainable fashion largely remains a pragmatic and a

radical change (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020) and it is quite apparent in the acts of fashion brands when they are making large investments in research & development to produce new sustainable products (Nayak, 2020; Johnstone and Lindh, 2022; Khare and Kautish, 2021). A rising corpus of research also suggests that the fashion industry fails to educate customers about these initiatives through branding and advertising (Hamlin & McNeill, 2023). Though the emerging research addresses issues related to brands communicating sustainability (Kutsenkova, 2017), the need at present is to go beyond the keywords like “eco-friendly” or “green” and attract consumers towards products’ quality, environmental benefits, and comfort. Present research attempts to this very issue by bringing clarity on how attitude – behaviour gap can be dealt if brands are embellished as cool.

The facet of “cool” is most often associated with youth-culture or youth (Runyan *et al.*, 2013) and it is the young consumers only whom fashion forecasters look at to understand labelling the modish as cool, novel trends and then translating it into growth avenues for fashion marketers (Southgate, 2003; Rahman, 2013). Literature also claims that Gen Z feel positive about the sustainability approach, but this positive attitude does not necessarily reflect on their behaviour towards sustainability practices (Palomo-Domínguez *et al.*, 2023). According to Amenuvor *et al.* (2023), brand coolness is favourably correlated with attitudinal brand loyalty by strengthening ties with other consumers. Furthermore, brand coolness strengthens brand preferences, encourages consumers to talk favourably about their cool brands, and raises their intents to purchase or use them (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022). Redefining sustainability as attractive and stylish is a barrier that sustainable fashion manufacturers must overcome (Tran *et al.*, 2024). Thus, by combining brand coolness with sustainability, brands can reduce the gap between sustainable and mainstream fashion, increasing the desirability and accessibility of sustainable solutions for a larger range of consumers (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Sustainable fashion firms can break the stereotype that sustainable fashion lacks style and reach a larger audience by integrating elements of brand coolness. Sustainable fashion companies can change how people view sustainability by incorporating brand coolness into their strategies.

Brand coolness possesses a substantial amount of explanatory power and stands merit for studying as a construct in its own right (Warren *et al.*, 2019; Sachkova, 2018; Runyan *et al.*, 2013; Byrne, 2018; Budzanowski, 2017) but no research till date has attempted to existent lack of academic understanding of how sustainable fashion can be reached out more quickly through the espousal of brand coolness. By attempting to the questions of “Does brand coolness have relationship with sustainable fashion?”, “can sustainable fashion be embellished as cool?”, and “what consumers associate cool with?” this research first assays on the association sustainable fashion has with brand coolness and then brings clarity on whether consumers really intend to purchase the sustainable clothing if it is projected as cool. Further, through the espousal of the idea that delineates that cool factor can be transferred to user through product and from celebrity to brand and later from brand to consumer (Loureiro *et al.*, 2024; Ferguson, 2011), this study provides insights to fashion brands on how ‘cool’ factor can assist in better dealings with attitude–behaviour gap existing on buyers’ part. Furthermore, by attempting to the questions “what are the attachment factors that affect purchase of sustainable fashion brands?” this study seeks to provide insights to brands on how they can apply the factors involved in better articulation of their branding strategies.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Sustainable Fashion

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3 Sustainability and sustainable development are considerable concepts studied by marketers and
4 researchers in 21st century (Mitchell, 2012; Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020; Hepner *et al.*,
5 2021). Sustainability has many definitions and synonyms like eco – friendly, green, fair trade,
6 ethical, conscious etc. (Joergens, 2006). The concept of Sustainability has emerged from the
7 “Brundtland Report of 1987”. This talks about desire of human towards better life with
8 limitation imposed by environment. Fashion industry is well known for adapting fast changes
9 with short product life cycle. Fashion and Sustainability seems tricky to go together
10 (Lundbland, 2016). The scope for sustainable movement is growing with the growth of eco-
11 conscious and social marketing and production operations. Sustainable Fashion is a part of the
12 larger trend of “ethical fashion” (Sharda *et al.*, 2012). Terms like organic, slow, sustainable,
13 eco, fair trade etc. are all interrelated and try to spread awareness against practices like worker’s
14 exploitation, animal cruelty, environmental damage etc. (Kutsenskova, 2017). As a corrective
15 measure first consumer mind-set needs to be shifted from quantity to quality. Another step can
16 be adaption of such production practise that it should not exploit natural and human resource
17 to accelerate manufacturing speed. In addition, consumers should opt for products with longer
18 lifecycle from manufacturing to discarding (Kutsenskova, 2017).

2.4 Sustainable Fashion embellished as cool

23 Concept of cool is identified as something up-to-date and desirable and is associated with youth
24 (Runyan *et al.*, 2013). Marketers use the concept to appeal consumers and build brand image.
25 Though synonyms of cool developed over years are hip, rad, groovy etc., yet it is characterized
26 as “innovative, stylish, original, authentic, unique and desirable (Bird and Tapp, 2008). Today
27 cool concept is seen positive in nature, however, to genuinely understand how sustainable
28 fashion practitioners look forward to the espousal of this phenomenon, one must affirm it with
29 them, the practitioners. Cool can be a game changer for the fashion industry (Loureiro *et al.*,
30 2024; Napalai and Khamwon, 2023; Sachkova, 2018). As consumers have shown certain
31 positive feeling and consciousness towards consumption of products that are cooler (Sachkova,
32 2018) and fashion professionals have described “Cool” as “added value” to product and brand
33 to place them as cool, it is interesting to explore if sustainable fashion can be embellished as
34 cool (Napalai and Khamwon, 2023). In other words, it stands merit to reveal if sustainability
35 and cool can work as a trigger for fashion brands to promote their products to consumers as
36 cool.

41 In order to reveal the answer of the questions – (i) is brand coolness associated with sustainable
42 fashion?”, (ii) can sustainable fashion be embellished as cool? (iii) what consumers associate
43 cool with?”, and (iv) what are the attachment factors that affect purchase of sustainable fashion
44 brands? - a sequential mixed-techniques strategy was employed in this study and a mention of
45 each of the prominent reasons behind this justification is as follows. Firstly, the above
46 mentioned research questions have not been extensively studied. Secondly, compared to a
47 single technique, using a mixed qualitative and quantitative design always allows for stronger
48 conclusions as well as the exploration of the confirmatory and explanatory research questions
49 (Wunderlich *et al.*, 2019). Lastly, by placing the results of the quantitative investigation within
50 the conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2013), we employ
51 triangulation to validate the findings.

3. Study 1 Qualitative study

58 A purposive sampling method was used, and participants were initially contacted through
59 electronic mail. The motive of the study was clearly informed to the respondents along with
60

the approximate time duration of the interview, i.e., 30-40 min. Permission was taken from respondents for recording and for later transcribing of interviews. The same was confirmed again at the beginning of the interview. For this study, 23 respondents were interviewed as Reynolds and Gutman (1988) advice that at least twenty respondents should be included in a research of qualitative nature. The participants of the study are aged between 22 and 65 years old, from various professional backgrounds including sustainable fashion brand owners, marketers, bloggers and influencers, academicians and researchers studying sustainable fashion as whole. Majority of respondents are from PAN India (n=19) while few respondents (n=4) are also from Singapore, London, Germany etc. (see Table 1). As interviews were conducted online, this expanded the scope to conduct interviews at international level. Online Zoom platform was employed for conducting and recording interview. The transcription was done using Microsoft 365-word transcription option.

Table 1 Respondents' Profiles

	Age	Gender	Country	Work Profile	Expert Category
R1	30	Female	India	Brand Owner-Cloth Quest , Sustainable Fashion and Sewing	Brand Owner
R2	23	Female	England	Founder of Mishi – a sustainable small business for clothing-Sustainable Underwear and clothing	Brand Owner
R3	39	Male	India	Director - Palette Global - Technology driven solutions for Sustainable Sourcing, Circular Fashion and Supply chain for the future	Marketer
R4	NA	Male	India	VP Operations (Group) - Manohar Filaments Pvt. Ltd.- Leading innovations in Sustainable Apparel Labels, Trims & Packaging	Marketer
R5	32	Female	India	Owner - Sustainability Stories , Instagram page features articles related to sustainability ; Working on own initiative - a brand directory which list Sustainable Brands on one online platform	Marketer
R6	20	Female	India	Owner - Ekaja - Made to order sustainable clothing, Slow Fashion	Brand Owner
R7	39	Female	Singapore	Style Curator/Image Consultant - Relatable Wearable styling	Influencer
R8	NA	Male	India	Dean Academics - World School of Design	Academician
R9	29	Female	India	Gift Green India - earth friendly, low waste & sustainable Gifting options	Entrepreneur /Influencer
R10	34	Female	India	Conscious Chori - Blogger spreading awareness about low waste living and sustainability.	Blogger / Influencer
R11	40	Male	India	Retail Head- Fashion Design (Men,Women, Accessories - Bewakoof.com	Retailer
R12	35	Female	India	Dean- School of Management; World School of Design ; Design Strategist	Academician
R13	34	Female	India	Head of Department - Times & Trends Academy ; Research Scholar- Textiles & clothing	Academician
R14	36	Male	Germany	Sustainable Fashion Strategist and Researcher - Mstudio, Berlin	Academician
R 15	25	Female	India	Fashion Designer (Fashion Designer at Channi Carpets and Textiles Pvt Ltd) & _Marketing lead for Infinate X(S brand), one commerce platform	Marketer
R16	28	Female	United Kingdom	Co-authors of book - Your planet needs you; Works in Fast fashion brands	Freelancer
R17	33	Female	India	Assistant Professor- MES college Marampally; Researcher - Slow Fashion	Academician
R18	27	Female	India	Sustainable Visionary & Writer; Founder - Vein studio ; sustainable Clothing	Blogger /Brand Owner

R19	25	Female	United Kingdom	Writer - Evoking sartorial consciousness beyond societal constructs	Influencer
R20	39	Male	India	Assistant Professor- ISDI Mumbai; Design strategist; Research Scholar - IIT Delhi	Academician
R21	23	Female	India	Here 2 stay- Sustainable Clothing, adding value to your wardrobe	Brand Owner
R22	31	Female	India	Brand Owner - Kaizen- Sustainable fashion Brand	Brand Owner
R23	25	Female	India	Freelance Fashion designer /working towards Sustainable & Ethical Fashion	Fashion Designer

Source: Authors' own, NA- not available

3.1 Results

Sustainable fashion isn't merely a passing trend; rather, it portrays a proactive approach to designing styles in alignment with the evolving demands of a more sustainable future (Lundblad and Davies, 2016). Sustainability has provided fashion and apparel brands with diverse guiding principles and opportunities. Sustainability is also compared with environmental activism and has become a movement of its own (Kutsenkova, 2017). Taking a leap in this very direction, in-depth interviews were conducted with experts on sustainability theme for better understanding of sustainable fashion and coolness of brand, and findings in this regard are presented as follows.

Concept of Sustainable Fashion

When one of the respondents defines sustainable fashion as *“creating in harmony with the environment as well as the people who are making it. So, I would describe it as a combination of socioeconomic aspects as well as the ecological aspects keeping in mind”*, s(h)e threads all the loose dots of brands, consumers, environment and strategy and then successfully tries to tighten it up through the force called sustainability fashion. To another respondent, sustainable fashion *“is way of life which is cool as it challenges the status quo and encourages us to think critically about the environmental and social impact of our fashion choices”*. Giving similar perspective, one respondent defines sustainable fashion as, *“incredibly cool because they're disrupting the traditional fashion industry norms”*. One of the experts opines, *“The brand love in the eyes of consumers play very important role here”*. An aspect to which majority of participants agree is, *“the gap in the market of sustainable fashion being high priced and fast fashion being low priced needs to be filled”*. It highlights the fact that brands need to communicate the benefits of Sustainable clothing and why it is expensive (Lundblad, 2016).

These thoughts on sustainable fashion are also displayed by NVivo in its world cloud when transcripts fed revealed sustainability as the word highlighted most by the respondents followed by fashion, brand, cool, consumer, clothes (see Figure 1).

1
2
3 fact that anything made with care and concern for society and environment will be cool to all
4 the parties, namely consumers, brands, employees, investors, and so forth.
5

6 *Attachment factors affecting purchase of sustainable fashion brands*

7
8 The buying of sustainable fashion brands is heavily influenced by factors related to brand
9 attachment. Customers are more inclined to select and stick with these companies if they have
10 an emotional connection to them. Nevertheless, there are many motivational factors beyond
11 attachment that drive consumers to purchase sustainable fashion, like self-expression, aesthetic
12 satisfaction, and group conformity. Few of these factors help accomplishing consumer
13 individuality and self-esteem through products which are long lasting, high quality, unique
14 design, guilt free etc. (Lundblad *et al.*, 2016). When asked in this regard, one of the experts
15 during in-depth interviews responds, *“The feel, the fit, the quality are some important factors*
16 *that consumers always consider while buying any garment. But majority of consumers*
17 *emotionally commit to a sustainable fashion brand and have a strong emotional connection to*
18 *its mission and narrative.”* It highlights the fact that customers developing a deep emotional
19 bond and feeling of fascination with a brand, and it can influence consumers to buy sustainable
20 fashion goods. Another respondent says, *“Values, ethics, and environmental conscience are*
21 *crucial, but brand romanticism can also be a significant motivator for purchasing. When a*
22 *customer falls in love with a sustainable fashion company, they are committing to the brand's*
23 *goal and principles in addition to making a purchase, which can result in advocacy and long-*
24 *term brand loyalty”*.
25
26
27

28 One of the main motives for sustainable fashion brands in studying attachment factor at present
29 is to see how consumers look at the sustainable clothing. A sustainable brand marketer on this
30 opines, *“Sustainable fashion purchases are more likely to come from customers who have a*
31 *strong emotional connection to the concept of sustainability. They might believe that it gives*
32 *them pleasure when they focus upon sustainability”*. Adding to this, a respondent from retail
33 background claims, *“Positive associations can also serve as the foundation for an emotional*
34 *attachment to sustainable fashion. Customers may have had favourable encounters with*
35 *sustainable fashion in the past, which has left them emotionally invested in the idea and eager*
36 *to buy more of it.”* Another respondent adds, *“Positive prior experiences with a company's*
37 *products may serve as the foundation for a romantic attachment to that brand”*.
38
39

40 On being asked for the marketing techniques need to be followed by sustainable fashion brands,
41 majority of the respondents suggested, *“to be as transparent as much as possible”*; *“sharing*
42 *your story”*, *“awareness and educating our customers”*, *“emotional marketing and storytelling*
43 *strategies should be employed by sustainable fashion manufacturers which can create a sense*
44 *of arousal from customers and create felling attachment to the company and its merchandise.”*
45 etc. With a little bit different perspectives from the rest, a respondent also reckons, *“Making*
46 *consumers feel dominant by giving them more power like they are part of the brand, showing*
47 *how their choices can bring about a change”*. Through these statements, the emphasis has been
48 laid on the fact that marketers should focus on emotional attachment in such a way that it boosts
49 customer lifetime value, enduring loyalty, and a favourable reputation for the company.
50
51

52 In conclusion, shared values, trust, positive experiences, love, romance, and loyalty are
53 attachment elements that have a significant impact on the purchasing of sustainable fashion
54 companies. Customers are more inclined to prioritize and select sustainable fashion products
55 over conventional alternatives because of these emotional connections, which are frequently
56 based on. In the eco-conscious and ethical fashion sector, sustainable fashion firms that can
57 cultivate these attachment qualities typically create a devoted following and increase sales.
58
59
60

Coolness and Attachment for Sustainable Fashion

When one of the respondents was asked what s(h)e thinks on Coolness and Attachment for Sustainable Fashion, s(h)e said, *“It is crucial for both companies and consumers to comprehend the relationship between brand coolness and attachment in sustainable fashion. companies aim to build strong emotional bonds with their audience, while consumers want to support brands that share their values while remaining stylish and up to date. In a cutthroat industry, sustainable fashion firms rely heavily on this relationship to draw in and keep loyal customer.”*, another expert speaks, *“Consumers are initially drawn to a brand because of its coolness, but as they become more familiar with its merchandise, community, and values, their attachment grows stronger. For sustainable fashion firms looking to draw in and keep devoted customers who connect emotionally with the brand in addition to just thinking it's nice, this interaction is crucial.”*

On the basis of above discussion and literature available we suggest that brand coolness plays a significant role in how consumers construct their identities as cool individuals, drawing on the self-presentation theory (Baumeister, 1982). According the self-presentation theory, consumers constantly showcase themselves to others by consuming goods and services in public. Depending on the situation, these individuals may be able to interpret the symbolic meanings associated with the brands (Clark *et al.*, 1999). This implies that if a brand presents its offering as something cool, customers may view possibilities to indicate coolness and be acknowledged as cool people in situations where they exchange experiences with other brand customers. Among numerous attempts to define and gauge emotional brand attachment, Brand Romance emerged as a chic and all-encompassing paradigm. The self-expansion model (Aron *et al.*, 1998), which explains how people expand their identities, perspectives, and resources, forms the basis of this theory. During this procedure, one may learn about the partner's identity, assets, and viewpoints, which may lead to romantic connections. Subsequently, Reimann and Aron (2009) extended this analogy to connections between consumers and companies, proposing that brands possess unique identities, resources, and perspectives. But what happens when a consumer brand relationship of this kind matures was not considered by the self-expansion model. When Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011) first proposed the idea of "Brand Romance," they defined it as "a state of emotional attachment (evoked in response to the brand as a stimulus) that is characterized by strong positive affect toward the brand, high arousal caused by the brand, and a tendency of the brand to dominate the consumer's cognition." This concept highlights three distinct features of emotional attachment: the brand's control over the consumer's thoughts, its strong positive influence on the stimuli (the brand), and its elevated arousal. These components were determined to be pleasure, arousal, and dominance.

We established a number of coolness and attachment factors based on study 1 utilizing the five-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see table 2), which lead to the purchase of sustainable fashion brands. We concentrated on the most often reported factors such as brand coolness and emotional attachment factor (brand romance) in connection with literature available that influence customers' intentions to buy sustainable fashion brands in order to conduct additional quantitative testing.

Table 2 Thematic Analysis

Sample Quotes	Primary Codes	Selective Codes	Aggregate Theme
---------------	---------------	-----------------	-----------------

1 2 3 4 5 6 7	"I think comfort is the cool factor for me which gives me popularity."	Association of popularity with coolness	Association of sustainable fashion with coolness	Perception of Coolness
8 9 10 11 12 13 14	"If people feel more eager to shop if they know Sustainable fashion are exclusive unique and useful items."	Association of usefulness with coolness		
15 16 17 18 19 20	"A fashion article is cool for me if it fulfils my need and gives me feeling of high status."	Association of need fulfilment with high status		
21 22 23 24 25	"It is cool if it stands for similar beliefs and values that's part of my sub-culture."	Sub-culture orientation based on values		
26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35	"Majority of consumers emotionally commit to a sustainable fashion brand and have a strong emotional connection to its mission and narrative."	Narration of emotional connection	Emotional bonds and aligned values	Emotional Attachment
36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44	"When a customer falls in love with a sustainable fashion company, they are committing to the brand's goal and principles."	Commitment to brand value		
45 46 47 48 49 50 51	"They might believe that it gives them pleasure when they focus upon sustainability."	Feeling of great pleasure	Brand Affinity	Brand Romance
52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60	"Positive prior experiences with a company's products may serve as the foundation for a romantic attachment to that brand."	Attraction towards the brand		

"When a customer falls in love with a sustainable fashion company, they are committing to the brand's goal and principles."	Obsession towards the brand
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Source: Authors' own

4. Study 2 Quantitative study

4.1 Hypotheses formation

According to Attiq *et al.* (2022), brand coolness acts as a stimulus in arousing brand love and brand engagement among consumers and then these two ultimately result in psychological wellbeing of the consumers. Here brand love is a high-order facet that include several emotions, behaviours, and cognitions (Fehr, 2006, 2009) which are far beyond the brand attachment (Thomson *et al.*, 1995) and self-brand relations (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Brand love can be caused by eleven dimensions, namely long relationship, dreams, self-congruity, pleasure, memories, attraction, beauty, trust, uniqueness, passion and inclination to express this love (Albert *et al.*, 2008). But these aspects strongly resemble with the three aspects of pleasure, dominance and arousal which ultimately underlie brand romance. It inferences that brand coolness stimulates in arousing brand romance as well. To prove this proposition, it is hypothesized that -

H1: Brand Coolness significantly influences the Brand Romance

As discussed above, if sustainable fashion embellished as cool, there are high chances that there will be an arousal among the psyche of the customers towards it and they will feel romanticized towards the concerned brand. Brand romance here is the emotional attachment (evoked in reply to the coolness feature of a brand) which is typified by inviolable positive liking of the brand (Rathnayake, 2021). Brand romance has the propensity to dominate the psyche of the buyers (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011) and can lead to arousal of purchase intentions for sustainable clothing. To statistically prove this assumption, it is hypothesized that -

H2: Brand Romance significantly influence the Intention to Purchase the Sustainable Clothes

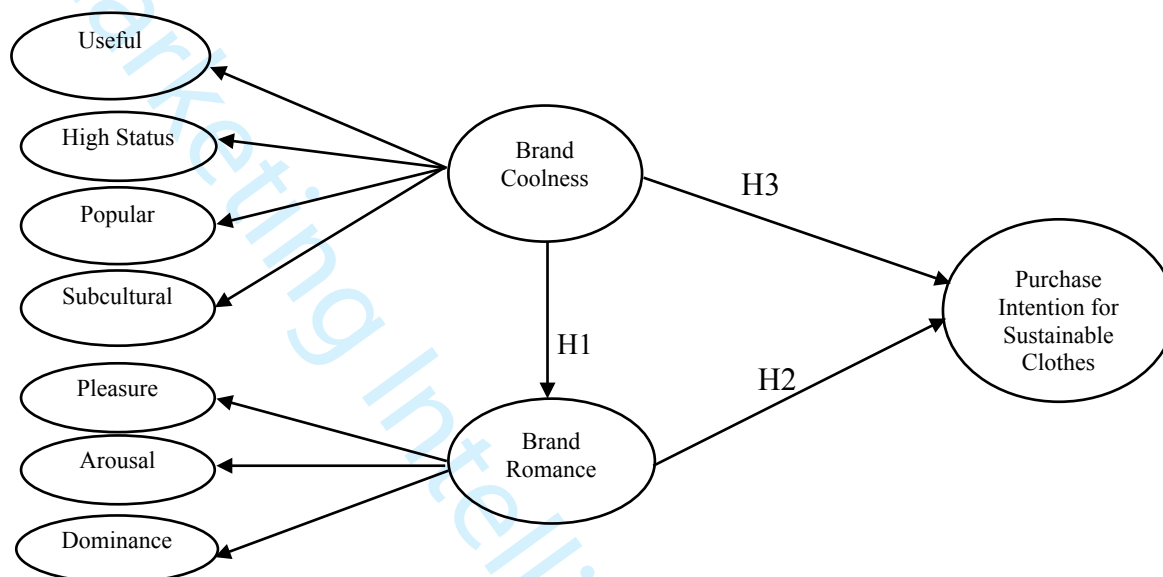
Brand coolness assures sustainability to brands. In research on sportswear, Jäkel (2020) revealed that brand coolness significantly influences the brand attitude and then brand attitude influence the purchase intention. Similarly, in the context of D2C e-stores of South Korea, three of the four aspects of brand coolness, namely high status, iconic, and popular, exert a significant influence on brand attitude and then brand attitude ultimately exerts an influence on the purchase intention (Lee, 2022). Moreover, Chen and Chou (2019) found a positive influence of brand coolness on attachment and intention to use (Liu and Mattila, 2019). Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011) described brand romance as an emotional bond. Studies focusing on the mediating role of emotional attachments in establishing consumer-brand relationships are documented in the branding literature (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012). Studies revealed that brand coolness is also a strongly associated with emotionally charged construct with a younger demographic (Napalai and Khamwon, 2023), and younger customers are more likely to be drawn to companies that project a cool image thus leading to a strong positive impact on purchase intentions (Jäkel, 2020). Thus we, hypothesize that

H3: Brand Coolness significantly influences the Purchase Intention

H4: Brand Romance mediates the relationship between brand coolness and purchase intention for sustainable clothes

To ascertain the above mentioned hypotheses, a hypothetical model is proposed (see Figure 2). It not only represents all the proposed hypotheses in a single frame, but also it showcases all the underlying traits of these three principal constructs.

Figure 2: Model proposed



Source: Authors' own

4.2 Methodology

Research Approach

This study employs mixed-method approach through the integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Espousal of mixed-method approach help researchers to establish relationship between variables well (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2021). Qualitative study techniques, on one hand, help researchers to attain a deeper, fuller and more personal understanding of the research concepts and variables (Mills & Birks 2014), while quantitative research, on the other hand, allows the researchers to generate statistical evidences about the concepts, variables and their relationships (Amaratunga et al. 2002). In this study, qualitative part assisted the researchers very well in understanding experts' perspective about sustainable fashion as literature suggests that in-depth interviews anticipate a means to overcome the communication barriers to a large extent (McNeill & Moore 2015). On the other hand, the quantitative part of the study helped the researchers in first understanding the opinions of sustainable shoppers towards brand coolness, brand romance, and purchase intention and then statistically proving the relationship among these three in a scientific manner (Djamba & Neuman, 2002).

Measures used for Quantitative study

In order to fulfil the objectives of the study, three measures of Brand Romance, Brand Coolness and Purchase Intention were employed for primary data collection. The Brand Romance measure was adopted from Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011), chosen for its comprehensive approach in assessing brand romance through the dimensions of Pleasure, Dominance, and Arousal. "I love this brand", "My day-dreams often include this brand", and "I want this brand" were the sample statements of each of these sub-constructs of Pleasure, Dominance and Arousal respectively. Further, the measure of Brand Coolness measure was adapted from Loureiro et al. (2020), known for its thorough coverage of brand coolness

dimensions such as usefulness, popularity, high status, and subcultural appeal. These sub measures of useful, popular, high status, and subcultural were comprised of four variables each and “This luxury fashion brand is useful”, “This luxury fashion brand is in style”, “This luxury fashion brand is ritzy”, and “People who use this luxury fashion brand are unique” were one of their constituent variables respectively. Additionally, the Purchase Intention measure was sourced from Rausch and Kopplin (2021), selected for its relevance in measuring intention to purchase sustainable clothing. It was consisted of four statements and "I consider purchasing sustainable clothes" was one of them.

The questionnaire was distributed to the Gen Z respondents, the ones who are born in between 1995 to 2012 (Priporas *et al.*, 2020). All these respondents (see Table 3) consist of actual and prospect consumers of sustainable fashion. The reason for choosing Gen Z, or young, is due to their high involvement in fast fashion (Zhang *et al.*, 2023; Kumar, 2019; Gulati *et al.*, 2023). Gen Z consumers are also accepted to gain good amount of brand knowledge and develop choice prior making purchase decision (Ismail *et al.*, 2021). A purposive sampling method was used for data collection and data was collected from under and postgraduate students of educational institutes of India having good amount of foreign enrolments.

Table 3. Sample Demographics

Distribution (n=688)	Frequency	Percentage
<i>(i) Gender</i>		
Male	392	56.9
Female	296	43.1
<i>(ii) Area</i>		
Urban	426	61.9
Rural	262	38.1
<i>(iii) Age</i>		
17-20	88	12.7
21-24	528	76.7
25-28	72	10.6
<i>(iv) Education</i>		
Undergraduates	321	46.6
Graduates	269	39.2
Postgraduates	98	14.2
<i>(v) Nationality</i>		
India	603	87.6
Nepal	19	2.7
Bangladesh	17	2.5
Sri Lanka	7	1.1
Afghanistan	11	1.5
Zimbabwe	15	2.2
Kenya	9	1.3
Nigeria	7	1.1

Source: primary data

To check the common method biasness (CMB) of the sample, Herman single-factor test was used on IBM SPSS® 19.0 by ‘Principle Axis factoring’ while extricating a single factor and the findings obtained on this reported that 24.870 % variance was explained by a single factor. As the percentage of variance explanation by a single factor was smaller than the threshold of 50 percent, no issue of CMB was reported (see Harman, 1967).

Data Analysis Method

For qualitative study, coding of interview and transcription was done by combining the responses of each respondent in response sheets. In each transcripts data cleaning was done to extra space, repeated words, remove special characters etc from transcripts. NVivo software is used for data analysis. The transcripts were imported to NVivo. Each transcript was coded. Word clouds were generated for extracting and analysing. For quantitative study, the data was

first refined/filtered and then fed to IBM SPSS® 19.0. Thereafter it was analysed through structural equation modelling (SEM) technique. All the analysis of SEM was performed on IBM SPSS® AMOS® 21.0 and 2-stage procedure of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was followed in this analysis. Herein, the first stage dealt with formulation and testing of measurement model whilst the second stage evaluated the structural equation model to testify all the proposed hypotheses.

4.3 Data Analysis and Discussion

4.3.1 Measurement model

It was made up of the constructs of pleasure, arousal, dominance, useful, high status, popular, subcultural and purchase intention for sustainable clothes. The measures of reliability, validity and model fitness received from measurement model are as follows -

Reliability

The scores of composite reliability (CR) for each of eight constructs were more than 0.7 (see Table 3) and it proved that the model was reliable (see Nunnally, 1978).

Validity

AVE counts for pleasure, arousal, and dominance constructs of Brand Romance were 0.657, 0.817, and 0.710 respectively, while AVE for purchase intention for sustainable clothes was 0.537. On the other hand, the scores of AVE for useful, high status, popular, subcultural constructs of Brand Coolness were 0.502, 0.588, 0.642, and 0.585, respectively. As, each of these eight counts of AVE was more than 0.5, the convergent validity of the model was established (see MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011). Further, as the inter-construct correlation coefficients of all these eight constructs were less than their corresponding square root of AVEs (see Table 4), it established the discriminant validity as well (Hair *et al.*, 2003, Kumar, 2020).

Table 4. Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	Useful	Popular	Sub-Cultural	Pleasure	Arousal	Dominance	Purchase Intention	High Status
Useful	0.798	0.800	0.502	0.808							
Popular	0.770	0.772	0.642	0.925	0.878						
Sub-Cultural	0.875	0.878	0.585	0.060	0.049	0.696					
Pleasure	0.885	0.885	0.657	0.448	0.520	0.088	0.811				
Arousal	0.815	0.817	0.628	0.046	0.134	0.070	0.220	0.826			
Dominance	0.708	0.710	0.578	0.045	0.128	0.055	0.228	0.968	0.787		
Purchase Intention	0.733	0.735	0.537	0.162	0.191	0.008	0.194	0.188	0.222	0.692	
High Status	0.791	0.792	0.588	0.935	1.003	0.040	0.508	0.060	0.083	0.162	0.799

Source: primary data.

Model Fit

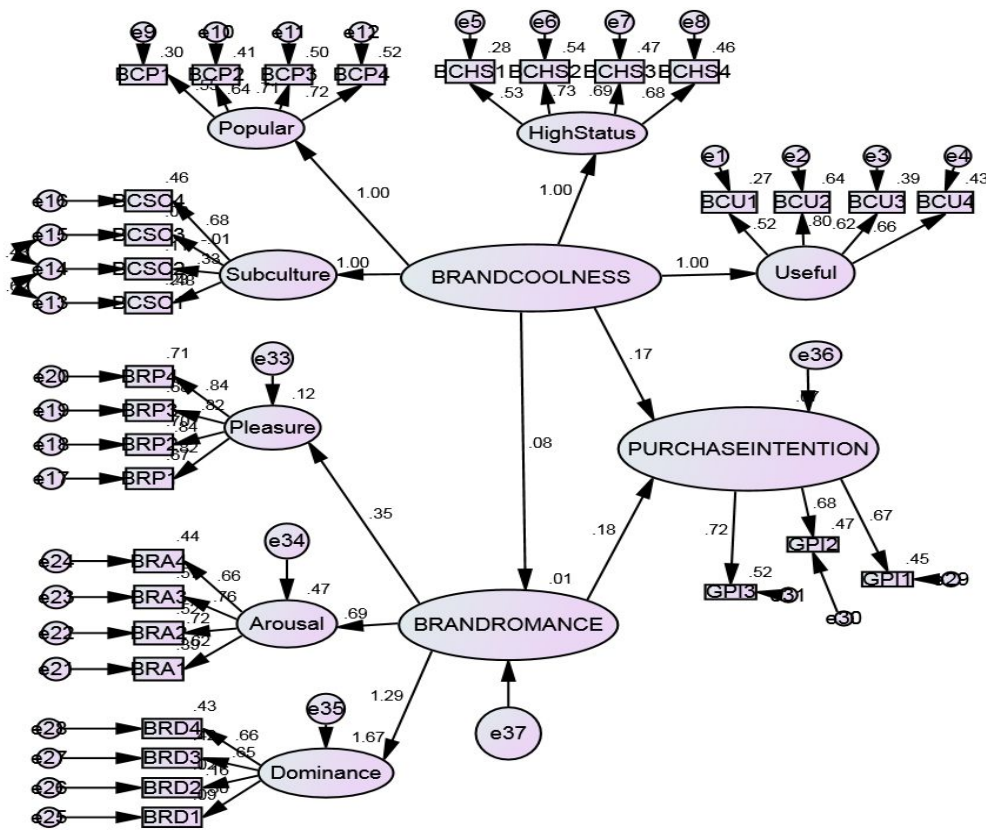
A model is said to be fit if its RMSEA is lower while its GFI and AGFI are higher (Lei and Wu, 2007). However, for a model to be a good fit, the value of RMSEA should be ≤ 0.06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), while the count of CFI should be ≥ 0.90 (Bollen, 1990). As far as CMIN/df is concerned, a model is called a good fit if CMIN/df is ≤ 3 (Kline, 2023), and it is said to be a reasonable fit if CMIN/df is ≤ 3 (Marsh and Hocevar, 1985). The default model in this study

with RMSEA of 0.056, GFI of 0.899, AGFI of 0.876, and CMIN/df of 3.133 deemed fit to go for analysis at the next stage.

4.3.2 Structural Model

The model fit indices of the structural model (see Figure 3) were tested before going for its usage in testing of the hypotheses. The CMIN/df of 4.127 (Marsh and Hocevar, 1985), RMSEA of 0.067, GFI of 0.862, AGFI of 0.841, and CFI of 0.849 (Malhotra and Dash, 2010) of the default model deemed reasonable fit and it allowed us to use the parameter indices of this model for testing of the hypotheses framed.

Figure 3. Structural Model



Source: Authors' own

In the parameter indices, the counts of all the critical ratio were more than 1.96 and the counts of standard error for each of the three paths were very small and explicit. As far p values are concerned, path of Brand Romance ← Brand Coolness was found to be significant ($p < .05$) at 95 % confidence level while the remaining paths of Purchase Intention ← Brand Coolness, and Purchase Intention ← Brand Romance were found to be significant ($p < .001$) at 99% confidence level (see Table 5). Therefore, H1, which proposed that *Brand Coolness significantly influences the Brand Romance*, is supported. In addition to it H2, which stated that *Brand Romance significantly influence the Intention to Purchase the Sustainable Clothes*, and H3, which states that *Brand Coolness significantly influences the Purchase Intention*, are also supported.

Table 5. Parameter indices

Path	Estimate	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	p	Result
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Brand Romance \leftarrow Brand Coolness (H1)	0.049	0.024	2.038	0.042*	Supported
Purchase Intention \leftarrow Brand Romance (H2)	0.341	0.084	4.066	***	Supported
Purchase Intention \leftarrow Brand Coolness (H3)	0.185	0.052	3.576	***	Supported

Source: primary data. ***0.001, *0.05

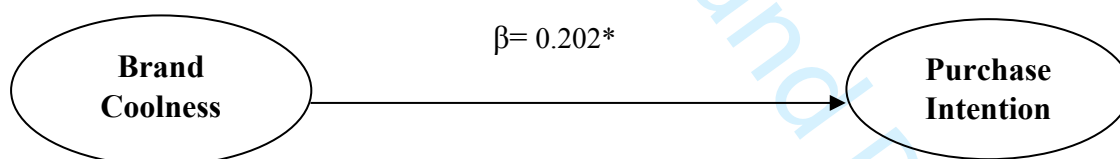
Moreover, this study used the Baron and Kenny (1986) methodology to evaluate the mediation of brand romance (pleasure, arousal, and domination) between brand coolness and purchase intention. With 5000 bootstrap resamples, the 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effects in this study was determined. Because it produces more precise confidence intervals and does not require the premise of normality, the bootstrapping approach (Zhao et al., 2010) has drawn increased attention recently. The indirect effect is deemed substantial if the 95% confidence interval does not include zero. The findings showed that brand coolness's influence on purchase intention dropped from 0.202 at $p < 0.05$ (without brand romance's mediation) to 0.185 (with mediation) and indirect effect using bootstrapping .017 at $p < 0.001$, 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI= [0.112; 0.243], indicating that brand romance plays a partial mediating role in this connection thus supporting H4 (see Table 6) (Figure 4), "which states that *Brand Romance mediates the relationship between brand coolness and purchase intention for sustainable clothes*".

Table 6. Mediation Analysis

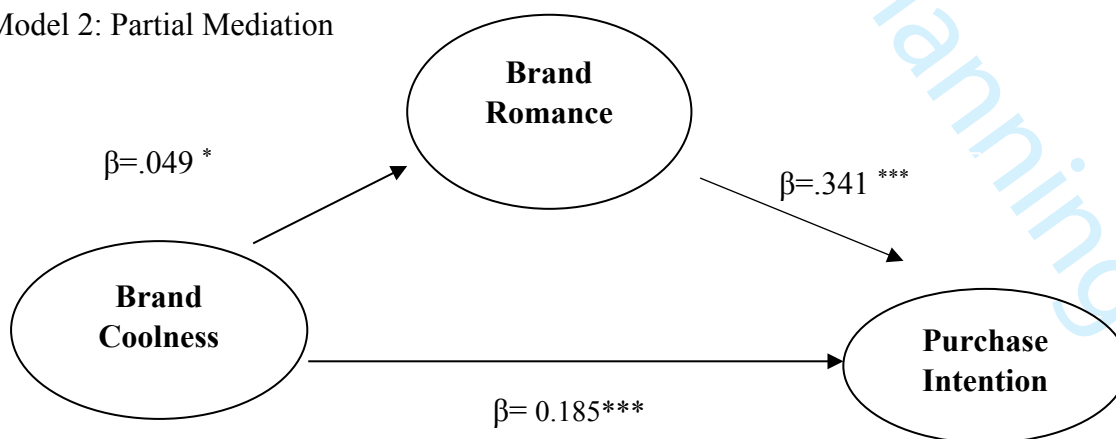
Relationship	Direct effect		Indirect effect using Bootstrapping	Result
	without mediation	with mediation		
Brand Romance \leftarrow Brand Coolness (H1)	0.049	0.024	0.042*	Supported
Purchase Intention \leftarrow Brand Romance (H2)	0.341	0.084	***	Supported
Purchase Intention \leftarrow Brand Coolness (H3)	0.185	0.052	***	Supported

Figure 4: Competing Models Brand Coolness–Brand Romance– Purchase Intention

Model 1: No Mediation



Model 2: Partial Mediation



Brand Coolness →Brand Romance →Purchase Intention (H4)	0.202*	0.185***	0.017***	Supported
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Source: primary data. ***0.001, *0.05

It concludes that Brand Coolness stimulates brand romance among buyers and both brand coolness and brand romance induce intention among buyers to purchase clothes that are sustainable.

5. General Discussion

This study contributes toward deepening our understanding to the fashion brands on how they can efficaciously employ sustainability in current circumstances, this study also contributes to existing literature in many ways. First, when there is no evidence of other academic work analyzing the synchronization sustainability has with coolness, the present study holds originality in adding to the literature on the pertinent aspect. Second, present study addresses the lack of an academic understanding of literature on sustainable fashion in its own way through conduct of in-depth interviews with experts working in the field of sustainable fashion and then validating the same by surveying the Gen Z buyers of sustainable clothes. Third, different dimensions of coolness impact various product categories in unique ways (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Makkar and Yap, 2018; Berger and Ward, 2010). Furthermore, our study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the dynamic character of coolness (Gladwell, 1997) and extending theory of emotional attachment and self-presentation theory. Last but not the least, when most of the studies on sustainable fashion have been conducted in piecemeal on either marketers or customers only, this study adds to the literature on the bases of (i) what all the practitioners, including marketers, brand owners, designers, bloggers, influencers, retailers and academicians, exercise and experience in their practice with sustainable fashion and (ii) what all the Gen Z customers actually do and experience while dealing with buying of sustainable clothes.

6. Managerial Implications

Fashion industry is now reviewing its strategies for revival. Present research attempts to develop an understanding of sustainable fashion so that brand managers can face the present challenges in a better way. The findings in this attempt of ours suggest that the sustainable fashion is a bit costly and can be employed better only when customers and brands both are acting responsible. To make customers act responsible, the brands need to make customers fully aware about in-depth knowledge of all sort of fashions, sustainability usage & its benefits to the society, and reasons behind costliness of sustainable fashion. The findings pertained to media usage suggest that espousal of social media along with various other promotional campaigns can enable brands in touching upon the grey areas pertaining to lack of consumer awareness on sustainability fashion. Lastly, the findings from synergy of sustainable fashion with brand coolness suggest that the managers working in sustainable fashion should embellish their brands as cool. It will not only assist the managers in taking care of attitude-behavior gap of buyers but also it will result in creation of positive brand identities and better acceptance for their brands among buyers.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Though the study is insightful to brand managers and adds to literature in many ways, it has got some limitations too. The first limitation of the study is that it in the qualitative study it covers whole of sustainable fashion while in quantitative study it concentrates on sustainable clothes. Therefore, future research may focus on any specific product category of sustainable fashion, like accessories, sportswear, office wear, footwear etc., for their upcoming research avenues. Another limitation of the study is that being a semi-structured interview based study

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2
3 it could not ask respondents to freely associate “anything related to cool”, rather it directly
4 asked them to define “cool” and whether “they think sustainability in fashion can be stated as
5 cool”. Without constrain, the result would have been different. Another major future research
6 direction could be exploring various areas of sustainability in fashion industry, namely
7 recycling, reducing, reusing, upcycling, etc., and revealing which of these is more appealing to
8 customers. Moreover, the participants for the quantitative study were from developing
9 countries which leads to limited generalizability of research findings. Forthcoming
10 examinations could utilize a more extensive sample by including participants from developing
11 countries to enhance generalization.
12
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14 15 **Conflict of Interest**

16 Authors do not have any conflict of interest to disclose.
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Do Brand Coolness and Brand Romance Synchronize with Sustainability? Insights from a Mixed-Method Approach

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