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VALUE-BEHAVIOR GAP IN DIGITALLY COMMUNICATED SUSTAINABILITY: EVIDENCE FROM THE FAST FASHION SEGMENT***Lucia Almaksus***Bratislava University of Economics and Management, Furdekova 16, Bratislava, Slovakia**E-mail: lucia.almaksus@gmail.com**Received 11 February 2026; accepted 18 April 2026; published 30 June 2026*

Abstract. The article focuses on the analysis of the value conflict among consumers in the fast fashion segment in the context of digitally communicated sustainability. The objective of the research was to examine the relationship between the declared importance of brand value attributes and their actual role in the purchasing decisions of digitally active consumers. The research was conducted through an electronic questionnaire on a sample of 2,210 respondents. The findings indicate a significant discrepancy between the normative evaluation of authenticity and the systematic interest in sustainability, while value attributes do not occupy a dominant position among the determinants of purchasing behavior. The results suggest that in the price-oriented fast fashion segment, the decision-making process is strongly influenced by pragmatic and economic factors. The study, therefore, contributes to the discussion on the limits of the effectiveness of digitally communicated sustainability under conditions of market economic rationality.

Keywords: value-behavior gap; sustainable consumption; digital marketing; fast fashion; economic rationality; price sensitivity

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Additional disciplines: sociology; psychology

1. Introduction

The expansion of electronic commerce represents one of the most significant phenomena of the modern digital economy in the 21st century. Due to the development of the internet, mobile technologies, and online payment systems over the last two decades, shopping activities have increasingly shifted from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to virtual environments. Consumers are now able to purchase products and services anytime and from anywhere, which significantly increases convenience and market accessibility. For businesses, e-commerce creates opportunities to reach a wider audience, reduce operational costs, and respond more flexibly to the demands of current and potential customers.

However, the growth of electronic commerce is closely connected with the issue of business sustainability. On the one hand, e-commerce may reduce the need for physical retail outlets, thereby lowering energy consumption and operational costs, as the digitalization of processes limits the use of paper documentation. On the other hand, the expansion of online shopping increases transportation, packaging, and logistics activities, which may lead to higher emissions and packaging waste. Sustainable e-commerce, therefore, involves the use of environmentally

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friendly packaging, optimization of logistics processes, support for local suppliers, and the implementation of energy-efficient technologies. The issue of sustainability in consumer behavior currently represents one of the most widely discussed topics in environmental economics, marketing management, and corporate strategy. Within the fashion industry, particularly in the fast fashion segment, environmental and social responsibility often come into tension with price affordability and the high frequency of consumption (Anh, 2025; Arriaga et al., 2025). The fast fashion model is characterized by rapid production, short product life cycles, and price accessibility, which creates an inherent conflict between sustainability principles and consumer economic rationality (Hageman et al., 2023; Herold & Prokop, 2023, Baena, 2024; Al Aghbari et al., 2025).

Digital marketing plays a key role in this process. Brands use online communication channels to build an image of social responsibility, present environmental initiatives, and declare commitments to sustainable development (Ma & Yong, 2025). At the same time, they operate in a highly competitive environment in which price elasticity of demand and consumer price sensitivity represent crucial determinants of purchasing behavior (Kotler et al., 2021; 2025).

In the literature, this contradiction is described as the “**value-behavior gap**,” referring to the discrepancy between consumers’ declared values and their actual purchasing behavior. Consumers often express support for environmental principles, ethical production, and supply chain transparency; however, in specific purchasing situations they tend to prefer cheaper alternatives (Essiz et al., 2023). This phenomenon raises questions regarding the effectiveness of sustainability communication in digital marketing and its actual influence on firms’ market performance (Pelikanová & Sani, 2023; Serrat et al., 2025). Electronic commerce also brings several risks, including cybersecurity threats such as personal data theft, payment fraud, or attacks on e-shop databases. Another risk involves insufficient consumer protection when dealing with unverified sellers, problems with product quality, or complicated complaint procedures. Strong competition in online markets may also disadvantage smaller businesses.

Overall, electronic commerce represents an important component of the modern economy and its significance will likely continue to grow. However, its long-term and responsible development requires addressing environmental issues, improving online security, and ensuring fair conditions for both consumers and businesses. Cherednichenko et al. (2023) emphasize that the implementation of information technologies is associated with risks, particularly in the area of personal data protection.

The empirical part of the article is based on quantitative research conducted on a sample of 2,210 respondents. The results indicate that active monitoring of brand value attributes, including sustainability, represents a minority behavior, whereas price rationality and other pragmatic factors play a dominant role in the purchasing process.

The findings are further discussed in the context of the economic performance of the analyzed companies, enabling a broader interpretation of the effectiveness of sustainability-oriented marketing strategies. The research focuses on digitally communicated sustainability and its perception by consumers in the context of three globally operating fast fashion companies. The article contributes to the theoretical discussion about the limits of normative marketing concepts in a highly competitive and price-oriented market environment and provides implications for the development of digital marketing strategies in the fast fashion segment.

This study contributes to the existing literature by empirically examining the extent to which digitally communicated sustainability influences consumer purchasing behavior in a highly price-sensitive market environment, thereby providing new insights into the structural determinants of the value-behavior gap in the fast fashion segment.

2. Theoretical background

In marketing theory, sustainability has emerged as an extension of the traditional concept of customer orientation toward a broader societal framework. While classical marketing management emphasized the effective satisfaction of target customer needs, the concept of societal marketing integrates long-term social welfare and environmental considerations into corporate decision-making processes (Cuhadaroglu; 2017; Chrystal et al., 2019; Cant & Bothma, 2023; Neha et al., 2024; Kabát & Lincényi, 2024). In this context, sustainable marketing is understood as a normative approach in which firms harmonize economic objectives with environmental and social responsibility.

Digitalization has transformed the way these values are communicated. Digital marketing enables brands to systematically present environmental initiatives, supply chain transparency, and ethical production practices through personalized, data-driven communication (Hamlin & McNeill, 2023; Isoraite & Alperyte, 2024; Ewis & Abdou, 2025). Social media, content marketing, and influencer marketing create space for building symbolic brand value, where sustainability becomes part of brand identity. However, the normative framework of sustainability enters into tension with consumer economic rationality. From the perspective of behavioral economics, purchasing decisions are determined by the maximization of individual utility under conditions of budget constraints (Acatrinei et al., 2025). Price represents a fundamental determinant of demand, particularly in market segments characterized by high competition and low product differentiation. In such environments, environmental attributes of products may be positively perceived but remain secondary to price accessibility (De Oliveira et al., 2022).

The fast fashion model intensifies this conflict. It is based on rapid production, short product life cycles, and aggressive pricing strategies, which stimulate high consumption frequency (Uchanska-Bieniusiewicz & Obloj, 2023). Consumers in this model are encouraged to make repeated purchases through a combination of low prices, trend variability, and intensive digital communication. Although brands increasingly implement elements of environmental responsibility, their business models remain primarily oriented toward volume and rapid turnover. This contradiction is conceptualized in the literature as the **value-behavior gap**, indicating the difference between declared individual values and actual behavior (Peeters et al., 2022). Empirical studies show that consumers often support sustainability initiatives but prefer cheaper alternatives when making real purchasing decisions. Explanatory factors include price sensitivity, distrust of marketing claims, information asymmetry, and cognitive dissonance (Gardarsdóttir et al., 2020).

The digital environment further complicates this phenomenon. Online communication enables relatively low-cost construction of a responsible brand image, while transformative changes in the business model may remain limited (Isoraite & Guleviciute, 2023). This may lead to a discrepancy between reputational communication and actual market performance. The fast fashion segment, therefore, provides a suitable empirical setting for testing the extent of value conflict. If companies with stronger sustainability communication do not achieve relatively better economic performance than price-oriented competitors, it may be assumed that consumer price rationality outweighs the normative influence of sustainability communication.

This theoretical framework forms the basis for empirical investigation of the consistency between declared interest in brand values and the real determinants of purchasing behavior in digitally mediated environments. Despite the growing body of research on sustainable consumption and digital marketing, the relationship between **digitally communicated sustainability and actual consumer purchasing behavior remains insufficiently explored within price-sensitive market segments such as fast fashion**. Most existing studies primarily focus on individual psychological determinants of sustainable consumption, including attitudes, environmental concern, and ethical awareness. However, considerably less attention has been devoted to **market environments characterized by strong price competition and high consumption frequency**, where economic rationality may

systematically limit the behavioral impact of sustainability communication. As a result, the extent to which digitally communicated sustainability influences consumer decision-making **in price-oriented fast fashion markets remains an open empirical question.**

This research, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between the declared importance of brand value attributes and their actual role in the purchasing decisions of digitally active consumers within the fast fashion segment.

3. Research objective and methodology

The research focuses on assessing the relationship between the declared interest in brand values, including environmental and social responsibility, and the actual determinants of purchasing behavior in the digital environment. **The primary objective** of the presented study is to analyze the extent of the value conflict among consumers in the fast fashion segment in the context of digitally communicated sustainability and to assess the consistency between the declared importance of brand value attributes and the real determinants of purchasing behavior. **A secondary objective** of the research is to identify the dominant factors influencing the purchasing decisions of digitally active consumers and to evaluate the relative importance of brand value attributes in comparison with economic determinants.

The research is therefore based on the following three research questions:

RQ1: What is the level of the declared importance of brand value attributes in the digital fast fashion environment?

RQ2: To what extent do declared value preferences translate into actual purchasing behavior?

RQ3: What is the relative importance of brand value attributes compared with pragmatic determinants of decision-making in the fast fashion segment?

Data Collection and Research Design

The empirical part of the research was conducted through a quantitative survey. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed electronically. The questionnaire was disseminated through digital channels of a female fashion influencer operating within the fast fashion segment. This distribution channel enabled the research to reach respondents who are actively engaged in the digital fashion environment and regularly consume content related to fast fashion brands. The questionnaire consisted predominantly of closed-ended questions with predefined answer options and Likert-scale items focusing on the perception of authenticity, the monitoring of brand value attributes, and the determinants of purchasing behavior. In addition, the questionnaire included one open-ended question in which respondents were asked to spontaneously identify the brand they perceive as having the most effective digital marketing. The open-ended question allowed the identification of respondents' perceptual preferences without predefined answer categories, thereby providing an additional qualitative indicator of perceived marketing effectiveness.

Research Sample

The total research sample consisted of **2,210 respondents**. The gender structure of the sample was strongly female-dominated, with women representing **98% of respondents**. This distribution reflects the structure of the digital fashion environment and corresponds with the dominant target group of the fast fashion segment, in which women represent the primary purchasing and communication-engaged consumer group. Considering the research focus on digitally active fast fashion consumers, the sample cannot be interpreted as representative of the entire consumer population but rather as **segment-specific**. The predominance of female respondents, therefore, does not represent a methodological bias but reflects the structural characteristics of the analyzed market environment (see Table 1).

Table 1. Gender structure of the research sample

Gender	Number of respondents	Share (%)
Female	2166	98.0
Male	44	2.0
Total	2210	100.0

Source: own processing based on quantitative survey data

The largest groups were respondents **aged 26–30 (31.8%) and 21–25 (30.5%)**, reflecting the demographic structure of digitally active fashion consumers (see Table 2).

Table 2. Age structure of the research sample

Age group	Number of respondents	Share (%)
16-20	184	8.3
21-25	675	30.5
26-30	702	31.8
31-35	421	19.0
36-40	144	6.5
40+	84	3.8
Total	2210	100.0

Source: own processing based on quantitative survey data

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical methods were used to evaluate the collected data. To assess the extent of the value conflict, a comparative analysis was conducted between the declared interest in brand values and indicators of purchasing behavior. Relationships between selected variables were analyzed using **cross-tabulation analysis and correlation analysis**. Responses to the open-ended question were subsequently processed through **manual categorization according to brand names**. Different graphical or linguistic variations of brand names were unified and aggregated into a single category to ensure consistency in the analysis.

4. Results and discussion

To address the first research question, the analysis focused on respondents' perceptions of authenticity and their level of engagement with brand value attributes, including sustainability.

Supporting question 1: Do respondents perceive authenticity in digital communication as important?

The analysis of the statement "*Authenticity in advertising is important to me*" revealed a strongly positive normative orientation among respondents. A total of 42.5% of respondents fully agreed with the statement, while 29.9% rather agreed. In aggregate, this represents 72.4% of the research sample expressing a positive attitude toward authenticity in advertising communication. A neutral position was reported by 19.6% of respondents, while approximately 8% expressed disagreement (see Table 3). These results indicate that authenticity represents an important normative value in the digital communication environment and forms part of the declared value framework of consumers.

Table 3. Perceived importance of authenticity in digital advertising

Response	Number of respondents	Share (%)
Strongly agree	939	42.5
Rather agree	661	29.9
Neutral	433	19.6
Rather disagree	132	6.0
Strongly disagree	45	2.0
Total	2210	100.0

Source: own processing based on quantitative survey data

The results presented in Table 3 confirm a strong normative orientation of respondents toward authenticity in digital advertising, indicating that authenticity represents an important declared value within the digital communication environment.

Supporting question 2: Do respondents systematically monitor brand value attributes?

Despite the high declared importance of authenticity, only 12.99% of respondents reported that they systematically monitor brand values, including sustainability. Nearly half of the respondents (49.23%) stated that they monitor such attributes only occasionally, while 33.4% indicated that they do not monitor brand values at all. Overall, 82.6% of respondents therefore do not demonstrate a consistent interest in brand value attributes. The comparison between the declared importance of authenticity (72.39%) and the systematic monitoring of brand values (12.99%) reveals a substantial discrepancy of approximately **59 percentage points**. These findings highlight a clear inconsistency between normative attitudes and actual behavioral engagement with brand values.

Consequently, the first research question (RQ1) points to a significant divergence between declared consumer values and the practical relevance of these values in everyday consumer behavior.

To address the second research question, additional questionnaire items were analyzed to examine the relationship between digital communication and purchasing behavior.

Supporting question 1: Does digital communication influence respondents' purchasing behavior?

The analysis of responses regarding the type of advertising that most influences purchasing decisions indicates that **influencers represent the most influential communication channel**, selected by 805 respondents. The second most frequent response (778 respondents) indicated that respondents do not base their purchasing decisions on advertising. Other forms of digital advertising, such as display or banner advertising, received significantly lower levels of influence. These findings indicate that interpersonal or socially mediated forms of communication may play a more important role in consumer decision-making than traditional forms of digital advertising.

To examine further the influence of marketing stimuli on consumer responses, a correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between influencer size and consumer engagement. The results indicate a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between influencer size and click frequency ($r = 0.06$; $p < 0.05$) as well as purchase behaviour after exposure to advertising ($r = 0.04$; $p < 0.05$) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation between influencer size and consumer response

Variables	r	p- value	N
Influencer size x click frequency	0.06	<0.05	2210
Influencer size x purchase after advertising	0.04	<0.05	2210

Source: own processing based on quantitative survey data

Despite statistical significance, the strength of the relationships remains very weak, indicating that influencer size alone has limited explanatory power in predicting consumer engagement.

Supporting question 2: Are value attributes among the primary determinants of purchasing decisions?

Brand value attributes did not appear among the dominant factors influencing purchasing decisions. Considering that only 12.99% of respondents systematically monitor brand values, it can be concluded that declared value preferences translate into purchasing behavior only to a limited extent. The results therefore confirm the existence of a **value-behavior gap**, consistent with findings reported in previous studies (Essiz et al., 2023).

To address the third research question, the analysis focused on identifying the key factors that influence consumer purchasing decisions in the digital fast fashion environment.

Supporting question 1: Which factors most strongly influence purchasing decisions in the digital environment?

The results suggest that purchasing decisions are largely determined by socially mediated stimuli or by factors that are not directly linked to explicit value communication. The fact that a considerable proportion of respondents declare independence from advertising further indicates the importance of internal or pragmatic determinants of decision-making.

Supporting question 2: Does the structure of responses indicate the dominance of economic rationality?

Given the low level of systematic monitoring of brand value attributes and the absence of these attributes among the dominant decision-making factors, it can be concluded that brand values do not represent a primary determinant of purchasing behavior.

In the fast fashion segment, which is characterized by high price accessibility and frequent consumption cycles, these findings suggest the predominance of **pragmatic and economically oriented consumer rationality**.

Additional evidence regarding the relative importance of brand values was obtained from the open-ended question in which respondents spontaneously identified the brand with the most effective digital marketing.

The most frequently mentioned brands were **Zara (189 responses)** and **SHEIN (130 responses)**, while **H&M was mentioned significantly less frequently (83 responses)**.

It is important to note that the perception of marketing effectiveness does not automatically imply a direct change in purchasing behavior nor a causal relationship with actual purchase decisions. Perceived marketing effectiveness and real consumer behavior therefore represent analytically distinct categories. However, it should also be noted that Zara (Inditex) and SHEIN belong to the most dominant global players in the fast fashion industry in terms of sales volume. The consistency between their strong market position and the perception of marketing effectiveness suggests that marketing performance in this segment is not primarily determined by sustainability reputation. In the context of the previous findings, particularly the low level of systematic monitoring of brand values (12.99%), these results support the conclusion that value attributes play a **secondary role in the decision-making process compared with pragmatic and economic determinants**.

Consequently, the third research question (RQ3) indicates that in a price-oriented fast fashion market, sustainability communication may serve primarily a **symbolic rather than a decisive function** in consumer decision-making.

Interpretation of key research findings is provided below in Table 5.

Table 5. Interpretation of key research findings

Research dimension	Empirical finding	Interpretation
Perception of authenticity	72.4% respondents consider authenticity important	Authenticity represents a strong normative expectation in digital communication
Monitoring of brand values	Only 12.99% systematically monitor brand sustainability values	Low behavioral engagement with value attributes
Influence of digital communication	Influencers represent the most influential communication channel	Socially mediated communication plays a key role in shaping consumer attention
Determinants of purchasing behavior	Value attributes are not dominant decision factors	Purchasing decisions are primarily influenced by pragmatic considerations

Source: own processing based on quantitative survey data

Conclusions

The findings of the study reveal a substantial discrepancy between the normative evaluation of authenticity in digital communication and the actual behavioral engagement of consumers with brand value attributes. Although a large proportion of respondents declared that authenticity in advertising is important, this attitude is not reflected in a proportional level of active monitoring of sustainability or other value-based brand attributes.

The results indicate the presence of a **value-behavior gap** within the analyzed segment. While sustainability and authenticity are perceived positively at the normative level, they do not represent dominant determinants of purchasing decisions among digitally active consumers. The analysis further suggests that purchasing behavior in the fast fashion segment is primarily shaped by **pragmatic and economic considerations**, particularly price accessibility and market dynamics. The perceived marketing effectiveness of brands corresponds more closely with their overall market strength than with their sustainability reputation. This finding supports the interpretation that consumer decision-making in this segment is largely driven by **economic rationality rather than value-oriented considerations**.

These findings contribute to the ongoing academic debate on the value-behavior gap by highlighting its **structural dimension**. In the fast fashion context, the discrepancy between declared values and actual consumer behavior does not appear solely as an individual inconsistency, but rather as a consequence of the tension between normative sustainability communication and the economic structure of the market.

From a managerial perspective, the results suggest that sustainability communication alone may not be sufficient to influence consumer purchasing behavior if it is not accompanied by economic compatibility, particularly in price-sensitive market segments. Firms operating in the fast fashion industry should therefore consider integrating sustainability strategies with pricing structures and broader value propositions that align with consumer economic expectations.

For the theory of sustainable consumption, the results imply the need for a stronger integration of **market mechanisms and price elasticity considerations** when interpreting value-behavior inconsistencies in consumer behavior. The research is limited by the segment-specific nature of the sample, which consists primarily of digitally active consumers engaged in fashion-related online environments. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of consumers. Future research should therefore focus on **comparative**

analyses across different price segments of the fashion industry and explore experimentally how variations in price levels influence consumers' willingness to prioritize sustainability attributes in their purchasing decisions.

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