

Understanding Indonesian College Students' View on Slow Fashion: "It is Good, But I am Not Paying for It"

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ABSTRACT

Fast fashion is driving the global fashion industry and contributing greatly to environmental degradation through greenhouse gas emissions and textile waste. The positive attitude of Indonesian Generation Z consumers, particularly college students, towards sustainability does not always match their consumption of sustainable fashion, creating an attitude-behavior gap. The existing studies have mainly concentrated on the psychological barriers of the individual and neglected the wider interaction between stakeholders that affect consumption behaviour. This research aims to fill the gap by applying Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) in studying the complex fashion service ecosystem in Indonesia. The study developed a Rich Picture to identify systemic issues, a CATWOE-based root definition to clarify transformation goals and a Conceptual Model to guide coordinated interventions through participatory workshops with students, fashion brands, policymakers, educators and social media influencers. The results show that structural barriers, such as high product prices, weak policy enforcement, and conflicting social norms, reinforce the attitude-behavior gap by reducing perceived behavioural control and encouraging the continuation of fast-fashion consumption. Theoretically, the study contributes by integrating the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Service-Dominant Logic within a systems perspective. It recommends interventions such as multi-stakeholder governance, sustainability education and co-creation platforms to improve accessibility, strengthen stakeholder alignment and promote consumption of sustainable fashion in Indonesia and emerging markets

INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry is a major source of environmental harm, contributing an estimated 4% to global climate impacts and producing about 92 million tons of textile waste every year (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Štefko & Steffek, 2018). This damage is driven by the fast fashion system, which relies on quick production turnarounds and a disposable model. Since the year 2000, clothing production has doubled, but people are wearing each item 36% fewer times on average, leading to more waste (Bick et al., 2018; Jacobs et al., 2018). In Indonesia, a key growth market, spending on clothes increased by over 40% between 2015 and 2020, while fast-fashion brands expanded their presence in stores and online (Aprianingsih et al., 2023; Purwanti & Rudigdo, 2025). This rise in consumption has created serious local environmental problems, including a major waste issue. The country is grappling with a mounting waste crisis, where the fashion sector is a significant contributor to the nation's overall solid waste burden (Statista, 2025). This situation highlights the urgent need to shift toward a more circular and sustainable fashion system.

In Indonesia, Generation Z, especially university students, are central to this challenge but show a clear contradiction in their behavior. Studies consistently find a significant attitude-behavior gap: young people often voice strong environmental values but rarely act on them when shopping. Globally, while more than 65% of young consumers say sustainability affects their choices, research shows that in practice, factors like price, style, and brand name outweigh ethical concerns in over 70% of purchases (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). This gap is evident in Indonesia. One study found that 86% of young adults (18-25) are concerned about the environment, yet another revealed that affordability and keeping up with trends are the top buying motives for 78% of the same group (Aldilax et al., 2020; Wijaya & Paramita, 2021). A key reason for this mismatch is cost: sustainable clothing often costs 30-50% more than fast fashion, making it out of reach for many students (Chi, 2015). Social media also plays a powerful role. Young people see hundreds of fashion ads each week, and popular "haul" videos by influencers make buying large quantities of cheap clothing seem normal (Haines et al., 2023; Vladimirova et al., 2024). Therefore, this gap is not just a personal failing; it is the result of a broken system in which the goals of shoppers, companies, policymakers, and influencers are misaligned (Chhabra et al., 2022; Ozdamar Ertekin & Atik, 2015).

Despite much research on this topic, an important gap remains. Most studies use psychological theories to explain the gap by focusing on individual barriers, such as high prices or a lack of confidence (Carrington et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2021). However, this approach misses the bigger picture: how different groups in society, brands, government, schools and media interact to create an environment that encourages unsustainable buying. Very few studies have used a systems-thinking approach to understand how all these actors work together in a specific place, such as Indonesia, to keep the fashion cycle unsustainable. This study aims to fill that gap by asking how a systems-thinking approach can help us understand and fix the attitude-behavior gap in slow fashion consumption among Indonesian college students. To answer this, the study has

three main goals: first, to identify all the key groups involved in the fashion system in Indonesia and understand how they influence each other; second, to analyze how the current system keeps the gap between attitude and behavior in place; and third, to work with those groups to develop practical, realistic ideas for change. The research uses a combination of behavioral theory and systems thinking, specifically Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), to offer a new perspective on this complex problem (Checkland & Poulter, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2015). In practical terms, the results are meant to offer useful guidance for policymakers creating better regulations, educators designing lessons on sustainability, brands making sustainable fashion more affordable and attractive, and influencers promoting more conscious consumption. The ultimate aim is to help build a fashion system in Indonesia that makes sustainable choices easier and more appealing for the young generation.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Empirical Studies on Slow Fashion and Gen Z

Slow fashion, characterized by ethical production, durability, and mindful consumption, presents a counter-model to fast fashion's environmentally damaging paradigm (Fletcher, 2007; 2010). Research on Generation Z's engagement with sustainability reveals a conflicted cohort. While they express strong pro-environmental attitudes and a preference for sustainable brands (McNeill & Moore, 2015), their consumption behavior is often mediated by competing factors. A study by Jacobs et al. (2018) critically frames this as "green thinking but thoughtless buying," finding that despite positive values, actual purchases are dominated by conventional clothing due to habits, price sensitivity, and style preferences. This discrepancy is exacerbated by the influence of digital media and social networks, which normalize frequent consumption. For instance, Haines et al. (2023) analyze the powerful role of social media fashion influencers and "haul" videos in shaping sustainable fashion conversations, often prioritizing newness and volume over sustainability.

In the Indonesian context, specific empirical studies confirm this attitude-behavior gap and its drivers. Research by Aldilax et al. (2020) investigating youth in major cities identified product price, uniqueness, and social media influence as the top three antecedents affecting slow fashion purchase decisions. A more recent and comprehensive study by Aprianingsih et al. (2023) found that while environmental knowledge, subjective norms, and perceived consumer effectiveness positively influence purchase intention for slow fashion, the gap between intention and actual behavior remains a significant challenge, pointing to unaddressed barriers. This body of work establishes Indonesian Gen Z as a digitally engaged, value-aware demographic whose consumption patterns are nevertheless shaped by powerful market and social forces.

Theoretical Explanations of the Attitude-Behavior Gap

The persistent disconnect between pro-environmental attitudes and unsustainable purchasing in the fashion industry is most robustly explained by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). This model is directly applicable, as it posits that purchase behavior is driven by intention, which is

itself shaped by attitude, subjective norms (social pressure), and perceived behavioral control (PBC). Past studies confirm its relevance. For instance, research on ethical consumption by Carrington et al. (2014) found that while positive attitudes exist, translating them into actual buying is often blocked by low PBC, as consumers perceive significant barriers such as high cost and poor availability. Similarly, in the specific context of sustainable fashion, McNeill and Moore (2015) applied TPB to show that fashion-conscious consumers held favorable attitudes, yet their purchasing was dominated by fast fashion due to subjective norms that prioritize trends and low PBC over sustainable choices. These studies demonstrate that TPB is not an abstract model but a precise tool for diagnosing why positive eco-attitudes fail in the complex social and economic reality of fashion consumption.

To fully account for the external constraints that weaken perceived behavioral control, the Value-Action Gap framework provides a crucial complementary perspective (Blake, 1999). This model explicitly categorizes the barriers that hinder environmental values into individual (e.g., habits, price sensitivity), social (e.g., peer influence), and structural (e.g., market infrastructure) factors. Past research aligns TPB with this framework, illustrating how these barriers directly impact the core TPB constructs. Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik (2015), in their study on mobilizing slow fashion markets, identified high price (a structural barrier) and a lack of stylish options (a market-structural barrier) as primary factors that diminish consumer PBC and reinforce social norms favoring fast fashion. This creates a systemic lock-in: structural barriers shape social norms and cripple individual control, making sustainable fashion consumption an uphill battle. Therefore, past studies show that combining TPB with the Value-Action Gap offers a complete explanation, moving from psychological intention (TPB) to the ecosystem of real-world barriers that prevent that intention from becoming action.

Prior Applications of Service Systems or SSM in Sustainability Research

To address the multi-dimensional problem of the attitude-behavior gap, a shift from an individual-centric to a systemic, ecosystem perspective is essential. Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic provides this foundational lens by reconceptualizing markets as complex systems where multiple actors integrate resources and co-create value through service exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The study clarifies that value is not embedded in products but is determined by the beneficiary through use within a specific context. Viewing the fashion market through S-D Logic reframes the attitude-behavior gap not as a consumer failure but as a service ecosystem failure, where the interactions, institutions, and value propositions of various stakeholders do not adequately align to support sustainable consumption choices.

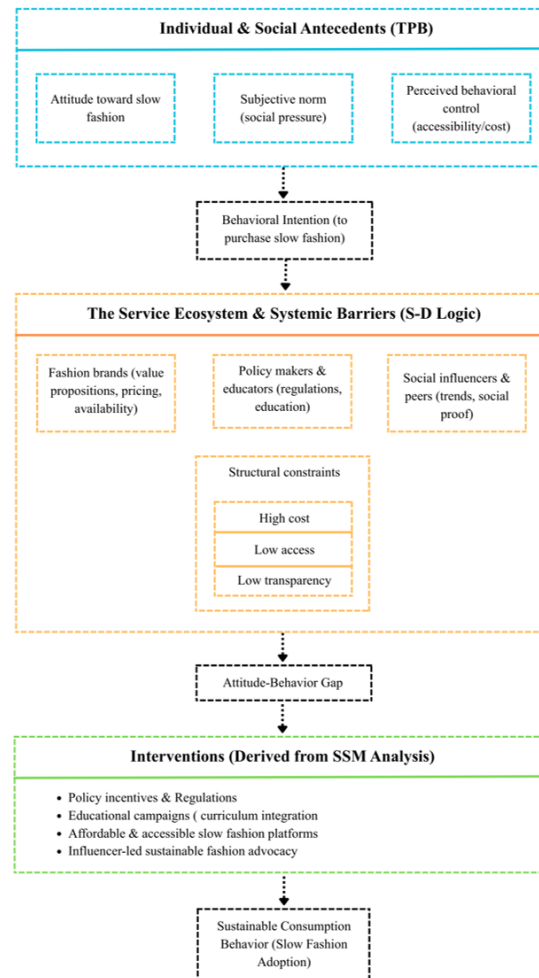


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Attitude-Behavior Gap in Slow Fashion Consumption

For diagnosing and intervening in such "messy," ill-defined human activity systems characterized by conflicting stakeholder worldviews, Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is a highly effective, learning-oriented approach. As detailed in its foundational applications by Checkland (1985), SSM is designed not to find an optimal solution but to facilitate a structured process for understanding divergent perspectives and defining culturally feasible, systemically desirable changes. While direct, peer-reviewed applications of SSM in the fashion consumption literature remain limited, its utility is well established in related domains, such as sustainability and complex project management. For example, the principles of SSM align with systems thinking approaches to tame complexity in projects, as discussed by Sheffield, Sankaran, and Haslett (2012). Therefore, applying SSM to dissect the attitude-behavior gap within Indonesia's complex fashion service ecosystem offers a novel, methodologically sound research opportunity to generate stakeholder-informed interventions.

To synthesize these theoretical perspectives and provide a clear roadmap for analysis, Figure 1 presents an integrated conceptual framework. This model visually integrates the core constructs from the Theory of Planned Behavior, the systemic barriers highlighted by the Value-Action Gap, and the multi-actor

dynamics of Service-Dominant Logic. It illustrates how individual behavioral intention is mediated and often disrupted by the surrounding service ecosystem, thereby explicitly mapping the pathway to the observed attitude-behavior gap and identifying key leverage points for systemic intervention.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), a qualitative, iterative framework designed to address complex, human-centered problems within ill-defined social systems (Checkland & Poulter, 2007). SSM is particularly suited to this research as it facilitates a holistic understanding of the multi-stakeholder service ecosystem surrounding slow fashion consumption, where divergent worldviews and conflicting interests contribute to the attitude-behavior gap.

The methodology unfolds through a structured seven-stage process (as seen in Figure 2), beginning with an exploratory phase to understand the problem situation through stakeholder engagement. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions that were employed in three half-day sessions, which consisted of several key actors, including Indonesian college students, fashion brand managers, policymakers, educators, and social media influencers, to gather rich, narrative insights into their perceptions, behaviors, and systemic roles, with 10 purposively sampled and 2 samples of each stakeholder. This qualitative input will be synthesized into a Rich Picture, a visual representation of the problem's complexity, which captures relationships, conflicts, and processes within the ecosystem.

Following this, the analysis phase will utilize the CATWOE tool (Customers, Actors, Transformation, Worldview, Owner, Environmental constraints) to define purposeful activity systems aimed at bridging the consumption gap. Conceptual models will then be built to map the activities required to achieve this transformation logically. These normative models will be systematically compared with the empirical reality depicted in the Rich Picture to identify discrepancies, leverage points, and systemic blockages. Finally, feasible and desirable interventions, such as integrated educational campaigns, stakeholder collaboration platforms, or policy incentives, will be derived and validated through a participatory workshop with stakeholders, ensuring the proposed changes are culturally relevant and practically actionable within the Indonesian context.

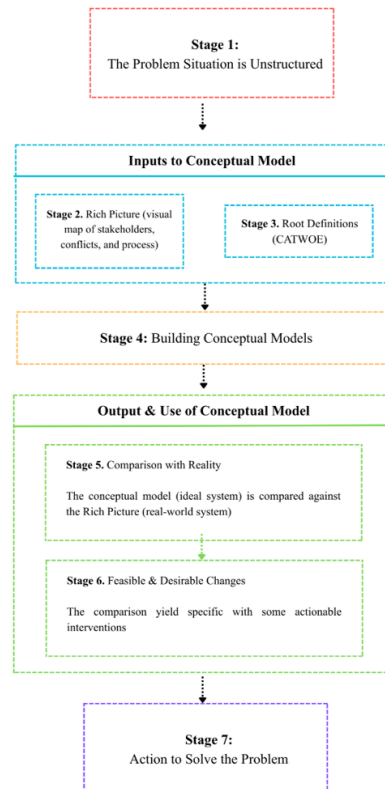


Figure 2. The Seven-Stage Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) Process

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the findings from the participatory workshops applying Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). The results are presented through three core artifacts that evolved from stakeholder engagement, followed by an integrated discussion connecting them to the study's theoretical foundations.

The initial phase of workshops culminated in the co-creation of a Rich Picture (Figure 3), which visually maps the complex ecosystem sustaining the attitude-behavior gap among Indonesian college students. At the center of the diagram sits the student as consumer, positioned at the core of the value-action gap where positive environmental attitudes fail to translate into sustainable purchasing behavior. Students face multiple competing pressures, including social conformity from peers and influencers, cost considerations that force constant trade-offs between affordability and sustainability, and exposure to optional sustainability modules within university curricula that provide awareness without challenging dominant consumption patterns. Surrounding this central tension, the picture reveals critical dynamics among key stakeholders. Fashion brands offer fragmented "green" collections while remaining driven by price and trend sensitivity. Social media influencers act as trendsetters, shaping consumer preferences. Educators serve as informers whose influence is limited by the optional nature of sustainability content. Legislators grapple with regulatory lag and enforcement gaps that hinder effective policy implementation. These interlocking dynamics, all embedded within a landscape dominated by fast fashion, validate the view that the attitude-behavior gap is not merely an individual psychological failure but an emergent property of a

misaligned service ecosystem in which stakeholder interactions systematically fail to co-create accessible and normative pathways for sustainable consumption.

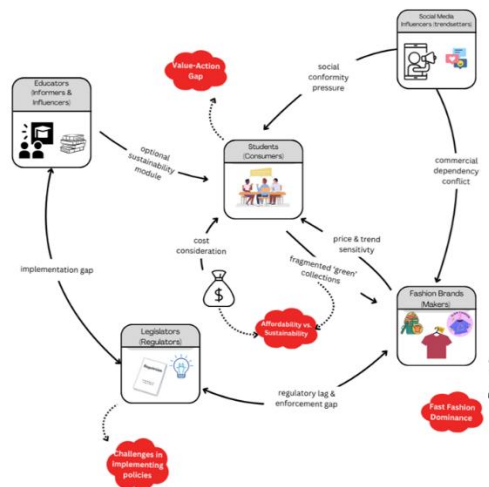


Figure 3. Rich Picture of attitude-behavior gap of fashion consumption among students in Indonesia

To define a purposeful system for change, a Root Definition was formulated and dissected using the CATWOE framework (see Table 1). Critical refinements emerged from stakeholder feedback. Most significantly, the Owner (O) was redefined from a singular regulatory body to a multi-stakeholder steering consortium, emphasizing collaborative governance. The Environmental Constraints (E) explicitly list barriers such as high price sensitivity and weak policy enforcement, which directly undermine perceived behavioral control. The agreed Worldview (W), that sustainable fashion must be desirable, shifted focus toward reshaping subjective norms. This CATWOE analysis operationalized the root definition as a system that transforms consumption through coordinated action, owned collectively by the stakeholders within it.

Table 1. CATWOE Analysis results

<i>Element</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
<i>Customers (C)</i>	Indonesia college students (primary); society and environment (secondary)
<i>Actors (A)</i>	Students, brands, educators, influencers, policymakers
<i>Transformation (T)</i>	Fast fashion consumption to mindful, sustainable slow fashion adoption
<i>Worldview (W)</i>	Sustainable fashion can be desirable, accessible, and normative
<i>Owners (O)</i>	A cross-sectoral steering committee (not a single entity)

<i>Environment (E)</i>	High-price sensitivity, powerful social trends, influencer algorithms, weak policy enforcement, brand cost structures
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Building upon this definition, a refined Conceptual Model was developed (as seen in Figure 4). The model outlines seven key activities in a logical sequence, updated based on gap analysis with stakeholders. It begins with establishing a governance consortium (Activity 1) and conducting a participatory diagnosis (Activity 2). This foundation enables three parallel intervention streams: integrating applied sustainability education (Activity 3), facilitating student-brand co-creation platforms (Activity 4), and launching norm-shifting influencer campaigns (Activity 5). These converge to inform a supportive policy framework (Activity 6), with the entire system subject to continuous monitoring and adaptation (Activity 7). The model is defined by feedback loops, ensuring it remains iterative and responsive.

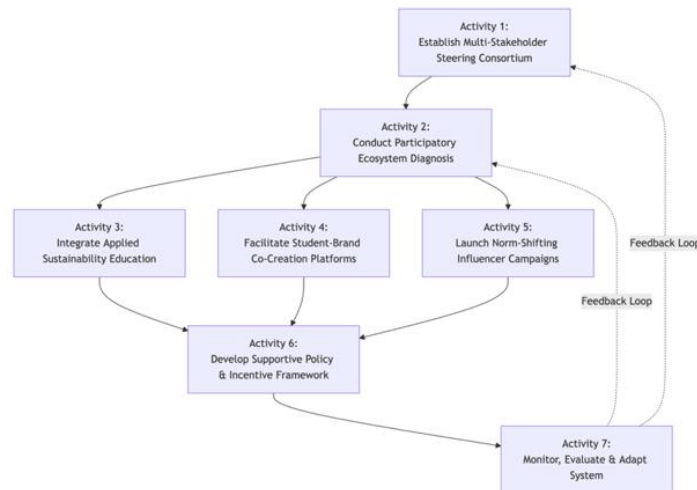


Figure 4. Conceptual Model Result

Collectively, these artifacts demonstrate the efficacy of SSM in transitioning a “messy” problem from diagnosis to actionable design. The Rich Picture aligns with Service-Dominant Logic, framing the gap as a multi-actor value co-creation failure rather than a consumer deficit. The CATWOE analysis bridges this systemic view with individual behavior theory; the listed constraints map directly onto the Theory of Planned Behavior’s construct of perceived behavioral control, while the focus on desirability targets subjective norms. The Conceptual Model synthesizes these insights into a viable intervention pathway. Activities 4 and 5, for instance, directly address the primary constraints of cost and social norms identified by students and influencers, respectively. This structured yet participatory approach ensures proposed interventions are both systemically desirable, as they realign ecosystem interactions, and culturally feasible, as they are rooted in stakeholder consensus. The study concludes that bridging the attitude-behavior gap requires a dual focus: redesigning the

relational structure of the fashion service ecosystem while simultaneously empowering the actors within it to co-create new norms and accessible value propositions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study successfully addressed its three research objectives through the application of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). First, the co-created Rich Picture identified and mapped the key stakeholder ecosystem, students, brands, influencers, educators, and policymakers, revealing how their misaligned interactions create systemic barriers. Second, the CATWOE analysis of the root definition diagnosed how high costs, social norms, and regulatory gaps actively sustain the attitude-behavior gap by undermining perceived behavioral control and reinforcing unsustainable norms. Third, the refined Conceptual Model provided a stakeholder-validated intervention pathway, prioritizing activities like establishing a multi-stakeholder consortium and launching co-creation platforms, thereby transitioning from systemic diagnosis to actionable, culturally feasible solutions.

Future research should prioritize implementing and empirically evaluating the core interventions proposed in this study, particularly the Campus Slow Fashion Hub and the Influencer-Educator Co-Creation Fund, to measure their tangible impact on purchasing behavior and norm change. Additionally, further work is needed to refine and adapt the integrated SSM methodology for broader contexts, developing streamlined participatory frameworks that can be applied to other complex sustainability gaps beyond fashion, thereby extending both the practical and methodological contributions of this research.

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