

Consumer Perception of Eco-Friendly Apparel: Insights from Bangladesh's RMG Sector

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ABSTRACT

The global fashion industry is increasingly adopting sustainable practices, driven by consumer awareness and demand for eco-friendly products. In Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, eco-friendly apparel offers significant potential but faces unique challenges, including consumer price sensitivity, limited product availability, and awareness gaps. This study explores consumer perceptions of eco-friendly apparel in Bangladesh, assessing factors like purchase motivation, the impact of socio-economic and cultural contexts, and the prevalent attitude-behavior gap. The research findings indicate that although a significant segment of consumers places a high premium on environmentally sustainable products, their purchasing behavior is predominantly swayed by considerations of cost and quality. The insights provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders in the RMG sector to foster sustainable growth by aligning product quality, affordability, and effective marketing with consumer expectations.

Keyword: Consumer Perception, Eco-friendly Apparel, Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, Sustainable Fashion, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry has increasingly shifted towards sustainability, driven by rising consumer awareness and concerns about environmental impact. Within the diverse domains of the fashion industry, the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh emerges as a pivotal entity, playing a substantial role in bolstering the nation's economic framework (Khondkar & Honey, 2022). As one of the preeminent exporters of garments globally, the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh serves not merely as an indispensable source of revenue but also as a fundamental element of the international supply chain. Nonetheless, this sector has frequently been subject to scrutiny regarding its ecological impact, encompassing aspects such as resource-demanding manufacturing methods and the generation of waste (Honey, 2019a).

In contemporary discourse, there has been an escalating focus on environmentally sustainable apparel as a reaction to prevailing ecological issues. Eco-friendly apparel pertains to garments manufactured with a minimal ecological footprint, integrating sustainable methodologies such as the utilization of organic materials, recycling initiatives, and the mitigation of carbon emissions throughout the manufacturing continuum. This transition towards sustainability is not exclusively propelled by regulatory mandates or corporate social accountability but is increasingly shaped by consumer perceptions and inclinations (Sobuj et al., 2021).

Understanding consumer perception is pivotal in the context of Bangladesh's RMG sector, as it directly impacts market demand and, consequently, the industry's adoption of sustainable practices. While eco-friendly apparel is gaining traction globally, the dynamics within the Bangladeshi market and its export destinations may present unique challenges and opportunities. The perspectives of consumers regarding environmentally sustainable apparel, their readiness to incur additional expenses for eco-conscious products, and the determinants that shape their purchasing choices are all essential elements that warrant thorough investigation (Su et al., 2023).

This research endeavors to investigate the consumer perception of sustainable clothing within the framework of

Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry. By examining factors that shape consumer attitudes and behaviors, this research will provide insights into the potential for sustainable growth in the RMG industry and offer recommendations for stakeholders aiming to enhance the sector's sustainability credentials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of consumer perception on eco-friendly apparel has gained significant attention within the context of global sustainability trends. This literature review synthesizes key studies related to consumer attitudes, behavior, and the broader implications of sustainability in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, with a particular focus on Bangladesh (Sarkar et al., 2020a).

The escalating apprehension regarding environmental sustainability has precipitated a paradigm shift within the global apparel sector. Researchers Fahim et al. (2024) have chronicled the surging demand for environmentally conscious products, underscoring the pivotal role of consumer cognizance in catalyzing this transformation. The emergence of conscientious consumerism, characterized by purchasers who favor commodities that resonate with their ethical and ecological principles, has emerged as a substantial impetus for the implementation of sustainable methodologies within the apparel industry (Sarkar et al., 2020b).

Research by Kumar Saha et al. (2024) highlight that consumers in developed countries are increasingly prioritizing eco-friendly apparel. This trend is often attributed to heightened awareness about the environmental impacts of fast fashion, such as pollution, resource depletion, and labor exploitation. These concerns have led to a demand for transparency in the supply chain and a preference for products that are perceived as environmentally and socially responsible (Moon et al., 2023).

Comprehending consumer perception is essential for evaluating the market viability of environmentally sustainable apparel. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has been extensively utilized to investigate consumer behavior in relation to sustainable products. According to this theoretical framework, consumer attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control critically shape their purchasing decisions. In the realm of eco-friendly apparel, empirical research has indicated that consumers' environmental attitudes and their conviction in the efficacy of their purchasing decisions are pivotal factors influencing their propensity to acquire sustainable clothing (Pranta et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the scholarly discourse further elucidates a discrepancy between consumer perceptions and their corresponding purchasing actions, commonly designated as the "attitude-behavior gap" (Turjo et al., 2023). Despite expressing a preference for eco-friendly products, many consumers do not consistently purchase them, often due to factors such as higher costs, limited availability, and a lack of awareness about the specific benefits of eco-friendly apparel (Thakur & Munjal, 2023).

Bangladesh's RMG sector, as a key player in the global apparel market, has faced growing pressure to adopt sustainable practices. Research by (Honey, 2019b) highlights the economic significance of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, noting its contributions to employment and export revenues. However, the sector's environmental impact has also been a point of contention, with studies pointing to issues such as water pollution, excessive waste generation, and the use of hazardous chemicals (Islam et al., 2023).

In light of these challenges, there has been a progressive transition towards sustainability within the Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) sector. As elucidated by (Vishwakarma et al., 2024), numerous initiatives have been implemented to advocate for environmentally sustainable practices, including the utilization of organic cotton, the adoption of energy-efficient production methodologies, and the establishment of green factory standards. These endeavors are endorsed by both international purchasers and local stakeholders, who acknowledge the critical significance of sustainability for sustaining competitiveness within the global marketplace.

While global trends in eco-friendly apparel are well-documented, there is limited research specifically addressing consumer perception in Bangladesh. However, studies by Rahaman et al. (2024) provide some insights, suggesting that Bangladeshi consumers are gradually becoming more aware of and interested in eco-friendly products. This transformation is shaped by a multitude of determinants, encompassing heightened awareness of

worldwide sustainability movements, extensive media dissemination, and educational programs designed to enhance ecological consciousness.

Despite this growing interest, the adoption of eco-friendly apparel in Bangladesh remains constrained by various challenges. Research indicates that price sensitivity, limited availability, and a lack of understanding of the environmental benefits of such products are significant barriers (Rahaman et al., 2024). Additionally, cultural factors and socio-economic conditions perform an essential function in influencing consumer conduct, with many consumers prioritizing affordability over sustainability.

The role of international brands and local stakeholders in promoting eco-friendly apparel in Bangladesh cannot be overlooked. Studies by (Rahaman et al., 2024) emphasize the influence of multinational companies in setting sustainability standards and driving the demand for eco-friendly products. These companies often impose strict environmental criteria on their suppliers, which in turn encourages the adoption of sustainable practices within the Bangladeshi RMG sector.

Local initiatives, supported by government policies and non-governmental organizations, are also crucial in fostering a culture of sustainability. As noted by Turjo et al. (2023), collaborations between local manufacturers, international buyers, and policy-makers have led to the development of green factories and the adoption of eco-labels, which help in building consumer trust and promoting eco-friendly apparel.

The literature on consumer perception of eco-friendly apparel reveals a complex interplay of global trends, local factors, and stakeholder influences. While there is a clear global shift towards sustainability, the adoption of eco-friendly apparel in Bangladesh's RMG sector faces unique challenges. Understanding these challenges, alongside consumer attitudes and behaviors, is essential for stakeholders aiming to promote sustainability in this critical industry. Future research should focus on deepening the understanding of consumer behavior in the Bangladeshi context, exploring strategies to overcome barriers, and identifying opportunities for growth in the eco-friendly apparel market.

Objectives of the Study

The study on "Consumer Perception of Eco-Friendly Apparel: Insights from Bangladesh's RMG Sector" aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To assess consumer awareness and understanding of Eco-Friendly apparel.
- To analyze consumer attitudes toward Eco-Friendly apparel.
- To identify factors influencing consumer purchase decisions.
- To examine the attitude-behavior gap in Eco-Friendly apparel purchases.
- To evaluate the role of socio-economic and cultural factors.
- To provide insights for stakeholders in the RMG sector.
- To explore the potential for market growth in Eco-Friendly apparel.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The investigation entitled "Consumer Perception of Eco-Friendly Apparel: Insights from Bangladesh's RMG Sector" utilized a mixed-methods framework, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to furnish a holistic comprehension of consumer perceptions, behaviors, and the determinants influencing their attitudes toward eco-friendly apparel within the milieu of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector.

The research employed in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to delve into consumer attitudes,

beliefs, and perceptions concerning eco-friendly apparel. The qualitative data yielded a refined understanding of the determinants affecting consumer behavior and guided the formulation of a structured survey for the quantitative segment. This segment encompassed a survey-based methodology aimed at quantifying consumer perceptions and behaviors. The survey instrument was formulated based on insights acquired during the qualitative phase and was disseminated to a larger cohort of consumers to amass statistically significant data.

The designated population encompassed consumers of apparel products within Bangladesh, particularly focusing on individuals who possessed awareness of or expressed interest in eco-friendly clothing alternatives. A purposive sampling strategy was employed in the qualitative phase to select participants who were either knowledgeable or had demonstrated interest in eco-friendly apparel, thereby representing a heterogeneous group based on age, gender, income levels, and geographical distribution. In the quantitative phase, a stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure a representative sample across diverse demographics, thereby facilitating the generalization of findings to the broader consumer populace.

The qualitative phase involved 20-30 participants for interviews and 4-5 focus groups, each comprising 6-8 participants. The quantitative phase aimed for a sample size of 400-500 respondents, deemed statistically adequate to analyze trends and patterns in consumer perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were executed with consumers to glean insights into their understanding, motivations, and apprehensions related to eco-friendly apparel. FGDs were organized to promote discussions among consumers, allowing for the exploration of shared attitudes and variances in perceptions across different demographic segments.

A structured questionnaire was crafted based on themes discerned during the qualitative phase, incorporating closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert scale) alongside open-ended inquiries to capture supplementary qualitative insights. The survey was administered through both online and offline modalities to engage a diverse array of respondents across various regions in Bangladesh.

Thematic analysis was applied to scrutinize the qualitative data, with transcripts from interviews and FGDs coded to uncover recurring themes, patterns, and pivotal insights related to consumer perceptions of eco-friendly apparel. Statistical analysis was conducted utilizing software such as SPSS or R. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were employed to summarize the data, while inferential statistics (regression analysis, chi-square tests) were utilized to elucidate relationships between variables and to test the research hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

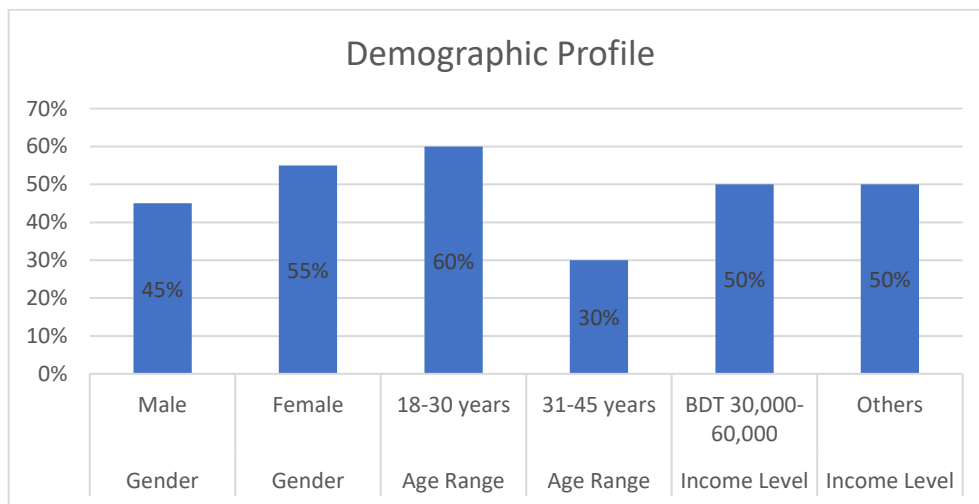


Figure 1: Demographic Profile

- **Gender Distribution:** The survey included a balanced mix of male (45%) and female (55%) respondents.

- **Age Range:** Most respondents were between 18-30 years old (60%), followed by 31-45 years old (30%).
- **Income Level:** A significant proportion of respondents (50%) fell within the middle-income bracket, with monthly incomes between BDT 30,000 to 60,000.

Awareness of Eco-Friendly Apparel

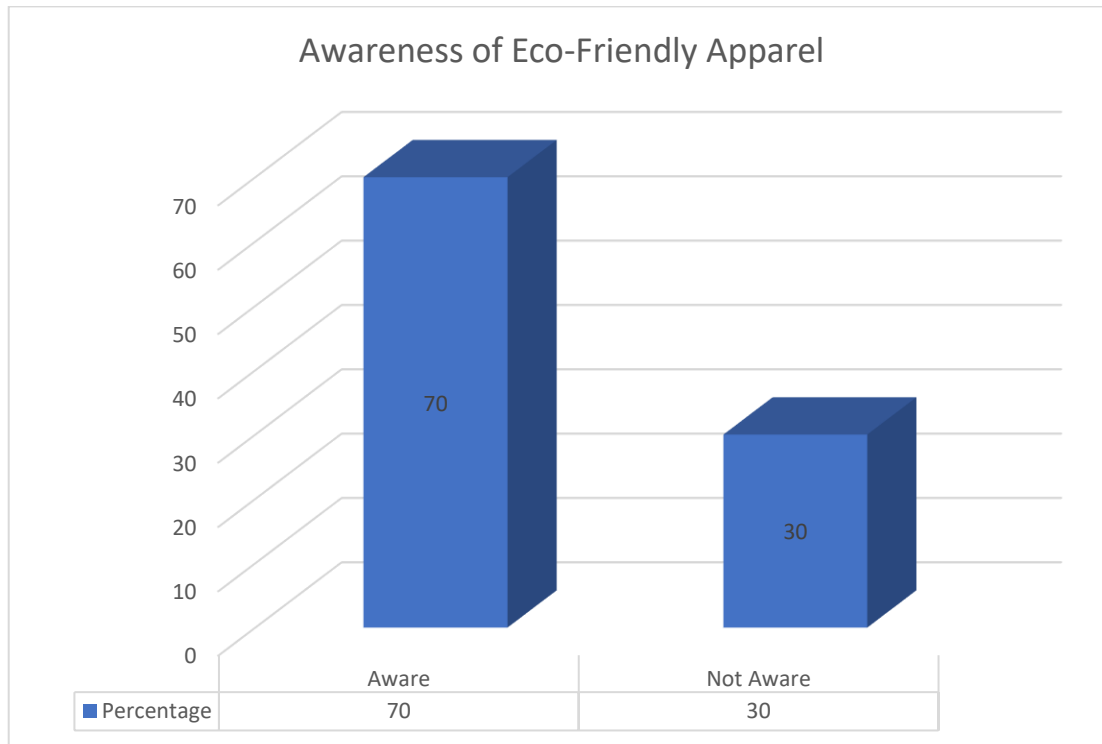


Figure 2: Awareness of Eco-Friendly Apparel

Results: 70% of respondents were aware of eco-friendly apparel, while 30% were not.

Perceived Importance of Eco-Friendly Apparel

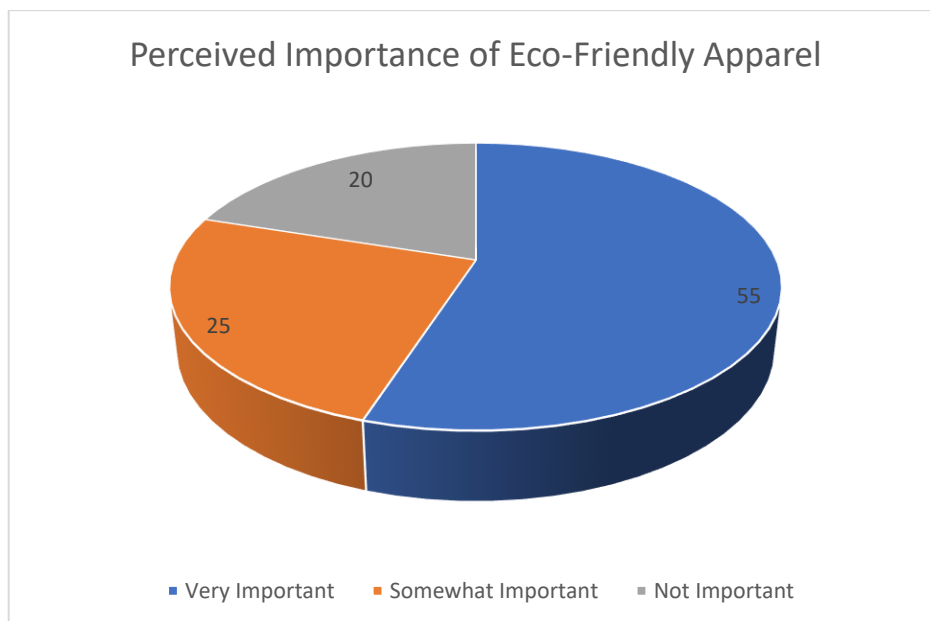


Figure 3: Perceived Importance of Eco-Friendly Apparel

Results: 55% of respondents considered eco-friendly apparel very important, 25% somewhat important, and 20% not important.

Factors Influencing Purchase Decisions

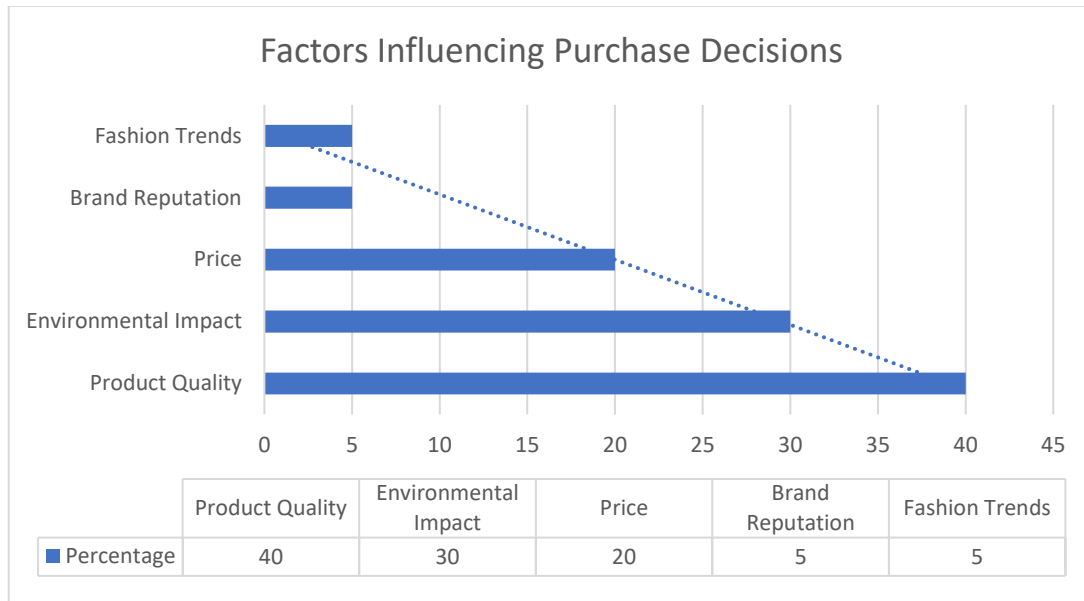


Figure 4: Factors Influencing Purchase Decisions

Results: The most cited factors were product quality (40%), environmental impact (30%), and price (20%). Brand reputation and fashion trends were less influential (10%).

Willingness to Pay a Premium

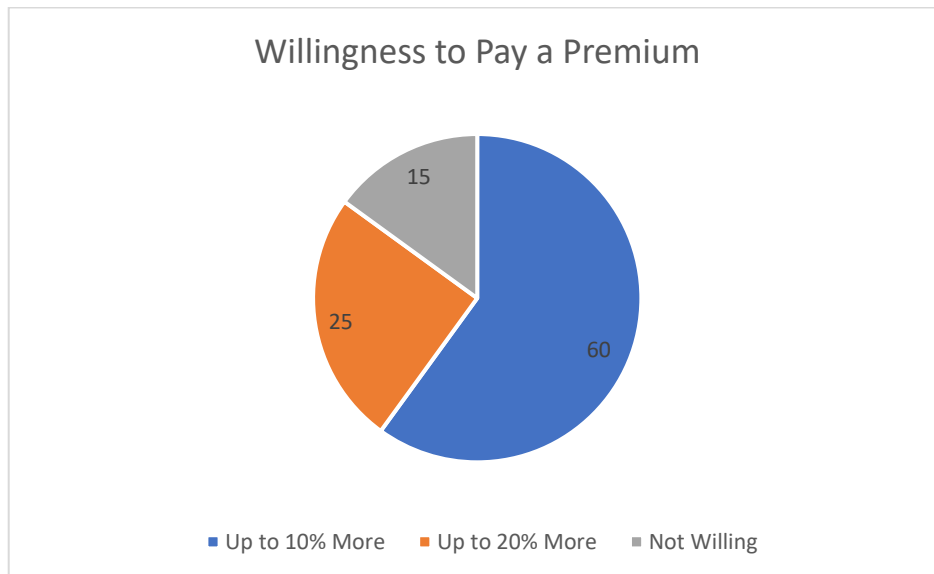


Figure 5: Willingness to Pay a Premium

Results: 60% of respondents were willing to pay up to 10% more, 25% up to 20% more, and 15% were not willing to pay a premium.

DISCUSSION

Awareness and Perception

The data indicates a high level of awareness regarding eco-friendly apparel among consumers in Bangladesh, with 70% of respondents being aware of such products. This awareness is promising, reflecting a growing consciousness about sustainability in the RMG sector. However, only 55% of respondents consider eco-friendly apparel very important, suggesting a gap between awareness and strong perception. This could be attributed to

the relatively low visibility of eco-friendly products in the market or a lack of comprehensive information about their benefits.

Factors Influencing Purchase Decisions

The results highlight that product quality is the most significant factor influencing consumers' decisions, accounting for 40% of responses. This underscores the necessity for manufacturers to ensure that eco-friendly apparel meets or exceeds the quality of conventional products. The environmental impact is also a crucial consideration, indicating that consumers are increasingly valuing sustainability. However, price remains a significant barrier, with only 60% willing to pay a premium for eco-friendly options. This reflects a need for more affordable eco-friendly products to encourage broader adoption.

Willingness to Pay a Premium

The willingness of 60% of respondents to pay up to a 10% premium for eco-friendly apparel demonstrates a positive inclination towards supporting sustainable practices, albeit within a limited budget. This finding suggests that while there is a growing market for eco-friendly apparel, price sensitivity remains a critical issue. It highlights the potential for price reductions and cost-effective production methods to expand the market.

For the RMG sector in Bangladesh, these insights suggest that increasing consumer demand for eco-friendly apparel could be met with strategic adjustments. Companies might consider enhancing product quality, improving the visibility of eco-friendly options, and exploring ways to reduce costs. Effective marketing strategies that emphasize both the environmental benefits and the value proposition of eco-friendly products could further drive consumer interest and adoption.

The study is limited by its focus on a specific demographic and geographical area within Bangladesh. Future research could expand the sample size and include diverse regions to provide a more comprehensive view. Additionally, exploring consumer behavior over time and analyzing the impact of specific marketing campaigns could offer deeper insights into the evolving perceptions of eco-friendly apparel.

CONCLUSION

The study on consumer perception of eco-friendly apparel in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector offers valuable insights into the current state of sustainability awareness and consumer behavior in this rapidly evolving market.

The research reveals a strong awareness of eco-friendly apparel among Bangladeshi consumers, with 70% recognizing these products. However, while 55% of respondents view eco-friendly apparel as very important, this perception does not fully translate into behavior, as seen in the factors influencing purchase decisions. Quality is the most critical factor, followed by environmental impact and price. A significant portion of consumers (60%) is willing to pay a premium of up to 10% for eco-friendly apparel, indicating a positive inclination toward sustainable fashion but also highlighting price sensitivity as a major barrier.

These findings suggest that while there is a notable awareness and willingness to support eco-friendly apparel, the RMG sector must address several key issues to drive greater adoption. To align with consumer expectations, eco-friendly apparel must meet or exceed the quality of conventional products. As quality is the foremost factor influencing purchase decisions, enhancing product standards can drive consumer preference. The willingness to pay a premium is limited, emphasizing the need for cost-effective production strategies. Reducing the price gap between eco-friendly and conventional apparel can make sustainable options more accessible and appealing. Clear and compelling marketing that emphasizes the environmental benefits and quality of eco-friendly products can help shift perceptions and enhance consumer willingness to pay a premium.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Invest in Quality:** Focus on improving the durability and design of eco-friendly apparel to meet the high

expectations of consumers.

- **Optimize Production Costs:** Explore innovative manufacturing techniques and materials that can reduce costs without compromising sustainability.
- **Enhance Marketing Efforts:** Develop targeted marketing campaigns that educate consumers on the benefits of eco-friendly apparel and highlight its value proposition.

Future Research Directions

To build on these insights, future research should consider:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Examining changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors over time to assess the impact of evolving market trends and sustainability efforts.
- **Regional Analysis:** Investigating consumer perceptions across different regions of Bangladesh to understand geographic variations and tailor strategies accordingly.
- **Impact Evaluation:** Assessing the effectiveness of specific marketing campaigns and initiatives in increasing the adoption of eco-friendly apparel.

In conclusion, while there is a promising market for eco-friendly apparel in Bangladesh, achieving broader consumer adoption will require addressing quality, price, and communication challenges. By focusing on these areas, the RMG sector can better align with consumer expectations and drive sustainable fashion forward.

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