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Rethinking sustainable luxury fashion: the role of serendipitous sustainability in second-hand markets

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ABSTRACT

The increasing normalisation of sustainable marketplace practices has enabled consumers to engage in sustainable behaviours without holding corresponding sustainable attitudes. Participation in second-hand luxury fashion markets often occurs in the absence of strong pro-sustainability beliefs. Building on attitude – behaviour gap literature, this study introduces *serendipitous sustainability*, defined as the enactment of sustainable behaviours that arise incidentally from social, structural, and market conditions rather than from internalised sustainability values. This research examines when and how consumers engage in second-hand luxury consumption without holding congruent sustainable attitudes. A literature-derived consumer typology informs an interpretive research design comprising 31 in-depth interviews with Generation Z and Millennial consumers of second-hand luxury fashion in New Zealand. Thematic analysis reveals that social context, sustainable attitudes (or their absence), self-efficacy, and sustainability knowledge interact dynamically to shape sustainable behaviour. We conceptualise a cyclical Social Determinants of Sustainable Consumption (SDSC) model grounded in these themes, positioning social context as a central, compensatory force that can bridge gaps between attitudes and actions. The model explains how sustainable behaviours can be initiated and sustained in the absence of sustainable attitudes through reinforcing feedback loops between social context, self-efficacy, and behavioural practice, captured by the concept of serendipitous sustainability. Managerially, the SDSC proposes a framework for identifying dominant behavioural pathways and activating social and structural determinants through targeted marketing initiatives. The findings suggest that the future of sustainable retail may depend less on changing consumer attitudes and more on designing marketplaces where sustainable actions are socially appealing, normalised, and structurally supported, allowing serendipitous sustainability to become an everyday practice.

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Introduction

In this paper, we examine when and how consumers are socially motivated to adopt sustainable actions without holding corresponding sustainable attitudes. More specifically, we propose that consumers can behave sustainably in retail contexts even when sustainability is neither considered, nor prioritised, as a guiding value. A notable segment of consumers already engage in sustainable behaviours without endorsing the underlying attitudes: reusable water bottles function as status symbols, and eco-friendly tote bags as identity-affirming brand collateral. Likewise, consumers may sell second-hand luxury goods or purchase pre-loved luxury items, not out of environmental concern but because participation in the second-hand luxury market is status-enhancing and aligns with current trends (Christodoulides et al. 2021; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019; Turunen, Cervellon, and Drylie Carey 2020). While such shoppers arguably behave sustainably, they do not always have internalised pro-environmental attitudes, but instead demonstrate serendipitous sustainable behaviour.

Consumer psychology has long demonstrated that attitudes tend to drive consistent and enduring behavioural patterns. In the sustainability literature, pro-environmental values and positive attitudes towards sustainability are widely positioned as key drivers of green consumption, including recycling, sharing practices, and the purchase of sustainable products (Haws, Page Winterich, and Walker Naylor 2014; Novoradovskaya, Mullan, and Hasking 2020; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). Consequently, marketing scholarship has largely centred on attitude change as the primary mechanism for promoting sustainable behaviours (Ajzen 1991; Tangri and Yu 2023). However, persistent attitude-behaviour gap findings suggest that favourable sustainability attitudes frequently fail to translate into consistent sustainable action (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019; Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern 2009). Similarly, research has begun to distinguish between conscious (awareness-driven) and subconscious (behaviours driven by habit or situation) drivers of sustainable purchasing (ElHaffar, Durif, and Dubé 2020; Sikakana, Cunningham, and Lubbe 2025). Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986; Phipps et al. 2013), and recent evidence suggesting that consumers often reach a practical limit or cap as to how ethically they can act within existing structural and resource constraints (Coffin and Egan-Wyer 2022) we argue that external environmental factors can cue and support sustainable actions independent of attitudinal commitment. We conceptualise this phenomenon as *serendipitous sustainability*: sustainable behaviours that emerge from situational, social, and structural influences rather than from internalised sustainable attitudes. This research contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption, and builds on the notion of an ethical consumption cap (Coffin and Egan-Wyer 2022), alongside the attitude-behaviour gap (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016). We suggest that the future of sustainable retail may hinge on a straightforward yet powerful principle: making sustainable choices socially relevant as well as systemically accessible, allowing serendipitous sustainability to become a part of everyday consumer behaviour.

The expanding second-hand fashion retail sector provides the broader context for this research (Hedegård, Gustafsson, and Kumar Paras 2020). More specifically, we focus on the second-hand luxury fashion market. Driven largely by Generation Z and Millennial

consumers, this market is projected to grow from USD \$208.6 billion in 2025 to USD \$521.5 billion by 2034 (GMI 2024). Second-hand luxury shopping has shifted from a niche practice to a mainstream market phenomenon, expanding at a pace four times faster than primary luxury goods (Boston Consulting Group and Altagamma 2019). This growth reflects structural changes in consumer behaviour, where resale is no longer stigmatised but increasingly normalised as part of everyday luxury consumption (Ki et al. 2024; Nguyen and Nguyen 2026).

While early research emphasised sustainability as a driver, scholars show that motivations are far more diverse. Consumers turn to second-hand luxury for affordability, access to unique items, and opportunities for identity construction and fashion experimentation (Amatulli et al. 2018; Sikakana, Cunningham, and Lubbe 2025; Turunen and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2015). Recent work also highlights that while sustainability value plays a role, it is only one of several drivers influencing second-hand fashion consumption, with pragmatic and hedonic motives often taking precedence (Holmqvist et al. 2025; Turunen and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2015). Luxury fashion has been criticised for being unsustainable (Winston 2016; Wulff 2024), making luxury resale a compelling setting for investigation. Scholars debate whether buying and selling second-hand luxury goods constitutes sustainable practice, given contradictory evidence regarding reduced demand for raw materials and decreased waste generated in producing new items (Carranza et al. 2023; Dahlbo et al. 2017; Luchs, Phipps, and Hill 2015; Vehmas et al. 2018). In line with recent calls for research on consumer typologies in sustainable luxury (Semaan et al. 2024), investigating the processes that drive consumers' adoption of second-hand luxury fashion emerges as an important objective for both retail practitioners and scholars (Hedegård, Gustafsson, and Kumar Paras 2020; Nguyen and Nguyen 2025).

Accordingly, this research examines when and how consumers engage in second-hand luxury goods consumption without holding congruent sustainable attitudes. We develop a theory-informed sustainable consumer typology with green thinkers, sustainability heroes, environmentally unaware, and serendipitous sustainable consumers based on the alignment (or misalignment) between their sustainable behaviours and corresponding sustainable attitudes. Our typology reveals a critical gap in current knowledge: serendipitous sustainability remains under-theorised and empirically underexplored. Accordingly, this research examines serendipitous sustainability and the research question: what influences participation in sustainable behaviours in the absence of congruent sustainable attitudes in the second-hand luxury fashion market?

We address this research question using a qualitative research design comprising 31 in-depth interviews with consumers of second-hand luxury fashion. The findings show that social context, sustainable attitudes and personal determinants (self-efficacy and sustainability knowledge) shape consumers' participations in second-hand luxury fashion. However, serendipitous sustainability, where sustainable behaviour occurs without corresponding sustainable attitudes, is explained primarily by social context and self-efficacy.

This research makes three contributions. First, it advances a four-part typology of sustainable consumer types and clarifies the distinctive nature of serendipitous sustainability relative to other forms of sustainable behaviour. Second, drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986), it demonstrates that serendipitous sustainable consumption is enabled by the social appeal and accessibility of sustainable actions, rather than by pro-sustainability attitudes. Third, this work integrates these empirical results into

a cyclical Social Determinants of Sustainable Consumption (SDSC) model, which conceptualises how sustainable consumption actions can be initiated and sustained without attitudinal alignment. This model provides actionable guidance for marketers by identifying when and how sustainable choices could be made easier, more visible, and more accessible within the marketplace.

Theoretical background

This section defines sustainable consumption, previews second-hand shopping attitudes, and reviews key theories of the attitude – behaviour gap and social cognitive processes to build the conceptual sustainable consumer typology.

Defining sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption is widely acknowledged as a conceptually contested idea, since the consumption of newly produced goods often conflicts with environmental and social sustainability goals. Contemporary consumption systems rarely support sustainable lifestyles and instead structurally encourage resource-intensive patterns of acquisition and disposal (Coffin and Egan–Wyer 2022), rendering non-consumption largely unrealistic. Consequently, scholars have adopted varied approaches to defining sustainable consumption. Some avoid narrow definitions altogether, while others extend the Brundtland Commission's (Brundtland 1987) influential framing of sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs.

Building on this tradition, sustainable consumption is commonly understood as practices that minimise long-term environmental harm, preserve resources for future generations, and contribute to social wellbeing (Lim 2017). This includes pro-environmental behaviour (Joshi and Rahman 2015); prosocial practices (Small and Cryder 2016); and ethical responsibility to environmental and social outcomes (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019; Zahid, Khan, and Tao 2023). Within this broad conceptual domain, second-hand consumption is increasingly recognised as a form of sustainable consumption, as it has the potential to extend product life cycles, reduce resource extraction, and generate both environmental and prosocial value (Machado et al. 2019).¹ In this study, we position second-hand luxury fashion consumption within this framework as a form of sustainable consumption practice where luxury fashion items are part of a circular economy: a closed loop model facilitated by the reuse of value (Medkova and Fifield 2016; Wulff).

Second-hand shopping

Market dynamics, brand strategies, and ethical considerations shape consumer choices toward more sustainable consumption practices (Dion, Pavlyuchenko, and Prokopec 2025), with consumer preferences shifting to a consumption model of circularity (Blom, Rosengren, and Perzon 2023). Circularity refers to items being kept within the cycle, as they are reused, recycled, and repurposed (James, Reitsma, and Aftab 2019), retaining value throughout the cycle (Hedegård, Gustafsson, and Kumar Paras 2020). In the case of second-hand luxury fashion, goods not only retain functional value

capitalising on their durable qualities (Holmqvist et al. 2025), but the brand retains social value. Consumers may also increase their financial capital (Dion, Pavlyuchenko, and Prokopec 2025) while at the same time fulfilling diverse motivational needs (Aycock, Cho, and Kim 2023). The motives for second-hand luxury fashion consumption may not stem from a desire for sustainable outcomes (Amatulli et al. 2018), challenging researchers to address this misalignment of attitudes and behaviours. While there is no demonstrated correlation between an increase in second-hand markets and a decrease in new production, second-hand markets have the potential to extend product lifespans, reduce waste and contribute to a circular economy (Maldini, Grimstad Klepp, and Maria Laitala 2025), making this context ripe for investigation.

Sustainable attitude-behaviour gap

Sustainable behaviour is enhanced when attitudes and behaviours are congruent and aligned (Matharu, Jain, and Kamboj 2020; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). Although attitudes play a role in maintaining consistent and long-term sustainable behaviours, a sustainable attitude alone is often insufficient to yield sustainable behaviour (Caruana, Carrington, and Chatzidakis 2016). Newer perspectives argue that what appears as an attitude – behaviour gap may instead be a ceiling imposed by market dynamics that restrict choice, uneven access to sustainable products, and routine resource scarcity (Coffin and Egan-Wyer 2022). While this body of work suggests that consumers may not be sovereign in their decision-making, resulting in a ‘cap,’ the current research examines the attitude – behaviour gap through the lens of external facilitators including social determinants to understand inconsistencies in sustainable consumption.

For instance, the presence of a sustainable attitude does not always translate to a sustainable action or purchase, especially when alternatives are less expensive or considered more effective. Higher-priced sustainable alternatives may lack the perceived features or benefits of their non-sustainable competitor products. While this attitude-behaviour gap may be driven by traditional marketing factors, such as price, availability, and functionality, there are also complex influential elements such as ethical messages, social norms, processes and more recently influencers at play, particularly in the second hand luxury goods market (Nguyen and Nguyen 2026; Parvatiyar and Sheth 2023; Turunen, Cervellon, and Drylie Carey 2020). The sustainability attitude-behaviour gap in this way is socially imbedded, complex, and context-dependent by nature.

Relatedly, social motives might drive a sustainable action, instead of sustainability and/or environmental benefits of the behaviour (Agerup and Nilsson 2016; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019; Turunen and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2015). Being ‘green to be seen’ (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010) illustrates the notion of virtue signalling (Turunen, Cervellon, and Drylie Carey 2020). This occurs when consumers are motivated less by the intrinsic benefits they receive from the behaviour, and more by extrinsic benefits such as substantial social and status rewards from impressing others (Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019; Wallace, Buil, and De Chernatony 2020). Consumers also send signals to others about who they are via their behaviours and purchases (Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Sustainability is increasingly fashionable and

demanded by younger consumers (Euromonitor International 2018; Holmqvist et al. 2025). Therefore, sustainable purchases can signal social status along with care for environmental benefits (Aagerup and Nilsson 2016; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019). Thus, for these reasons sustainable actions may precede or exist without aligned attitudes. This social factor has yet to be fully integrated into marketing strategies for sustainable consumption behaviours.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Theories of behaviour change have been fundamental in determining the interplay between consumer attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours that drive the adoption of sustainable choices. A dynamic conceptualisation of how attitudes and behaviours evolve interdependently emerges in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). In SCT, behaviour is cyclical and socially determined (Bandura 1986). And in this view, attitudes are a personal determinant, part of the reciprocal feedback loop that influences behaviour, which is influenced in turn by past behaviour. The feedback loop of SCT is crucial to understanding sustainable behaviour as it captures two key occurrences that are vital to sustainable actions: past behaviour and behaviour affecting personal and environment factors (Phipps et al. 2013; Turunen and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2015; Walser-Luchesi, Furst, and Rabeson 2025). Social norms, cultural norms (e.g. sustainability consciousness) and economic conditions of the social context influence sustainable consumption (Holmqvist et al. 2025; Phipps et al. 2013; Sawitri, Hadiyanto, and Hadi 2015). SCT encourages researchers to examine the interrelations of these factors with the inclusion of self-efficacy. The dynamic interrelationship of factors in SCT also allows for incongruence between behaviours and attitudes to be more fully explored in sustainable consumption.

Conceptual framework: sustainable consumer typology

Prior literature segmenting sustainable consumers is diverse, focusing on different aspects to categorise consumers from types of sustainable behaviour (e.g. ethical, healthy lifestyle, green behaviour; Semaan et al. 2024; Verain, Sijtsema, and Antonides 2016), to socio-economic attributes, attitudes, values, and sustainable concerns (Johnstone and Peng Tan 2015; Weber et al. 2018). Yet these typologies do not focus specifically on the interplay between sustainable attitudes and sustainable behaviours, nor explore when the gap between sustainable attitudes and sustainable behaviours occurs. Although earlier research suggests that all consumers have the potential to behave sustainably (Young et al. 2010) and that sustainable behaviours are not limited to those who identify as 'green', existing typologies do not explicitly account for consumers who act sustainably despite lacking corresponding attitudes. This serendipitously sustainable consumer segment informs the focus of this paper.

We propose a literature-derived typology (Figure 1) that classifies consumers across two dimensions: sustainable attitudes (high/low) and sustainable behaviour (high/low). This produces four consumer types. Quadrant 1 comprises green thinkers, individuals who hold strong pro-sustainability attitudes but do not consistently enact sustainable behaviours. This group exemplifies the well-established attitude-behaviour gap in sustainable consumption extensively examined in prior research (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

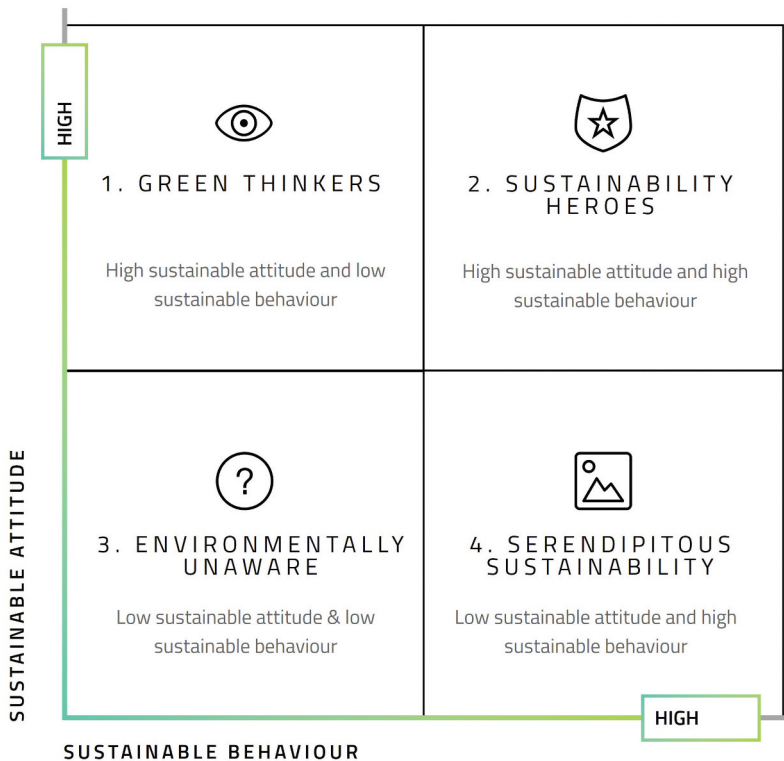


Figure 1. Sustainable consumer typology (source: authors' own work).

Quadrant 2 consists of sustainability heroes, who demonstrate high alignment between sustainable attitudes and sustainable behaviours. These consumers exhibit congruence between values and actions and have been described as sustainable fashion pioneers in earlier work (Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch 2015). Quadrant 3 captures environmentally unaware consumers with both low sustainable attitudes and low sustainable behaviours. Previously termed non-simplifiers, these consumers show limited concern for sustainability and sustain high overall fashion consumption with minimal engagement in sustainable products (Weber et al. 2018).

Quadrant 4 of the sustainable consumer typology represents serendipitous sustainable consumers, individuals who engage in sustainable behaviours despite holding weak or absent sustainable attitudes. These consumers are the primary focus of the present study. Related research has referred to similar consumers as socially conscious financial simplifiers, who exhibit limited environmental concern but have high social orientation alongside frequent participation in sustainable fashion markets (Weber et al. 2018).

Importantly this typology conceptualises consumer positioning as dynamic rather than fixed. Consumers move within and between quadrants in response to social and personal determinants, including sustainability knowledge and self-efficacy (Ferraro, Sands, and Brace-Govan 2016; Semaan et al. 2024). This dynamic perspective aligns with Social Cognitive Theory's principle of reciprocal determinism, whereby behaviour emerges from ongoing interactions between personal factors, prior behaviour, and environmental conditions

(Bandura 1986; Phipps et al. 2013). In this view, sustainable actions are not solely attitudinal driven but are also shaped by marketplace structures, peer influence, and role modelling.

Method

An interpretive research design was adopted to address the research question, with a qualitative research method of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The researchers' institution provided ethics approval.

Participants

Participants were 18–35-year-old second-hand luxury fashion consumers ($n = 31$) from New Zealand. Millennials and Gen Z consumers were purposefully selected as they make up a large segment of the luxury fashion market (Euromonitor International 2018; Jiang and Veg-Sala 2025) and they account for almost half of all second-hand shoppers of luxury apparel (GMI 2024). This study recruited participants who had supplied or purchased second-hand fashion items within the past three months via personal networks and social media followed by snowball sampling to achieve an appropriate sample size (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006)

Tables 1 and 2 summarise participant gender, age, and geographic location. The average age of participants was 24 years old, and the majority of participants were female (female = 28, male = 3). This is representative of second-hand luxury fashion retail which caters to a larger inventory of female fashion.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were face-to-face, lasting 40–75 minutes with open-ended questions following an interview guide. The interview began by asking participants about their most recent second-hand luxury fashion exchange, their motivations, and their opinion of the exchange. The interview finished with attitudes, feeling post-purchase, and their attitude towards future second-hand luxury exchanges. Prompts

Table 1. Participant profile: age and gender.

Gender	18–25 years	26–35 years	Total
Female	24	4	28
Male	2	1	3
Total	26	5	31

Table 2. Participant profile: geographic location and gender.*

Gender	Major urban centre	Regional centre	Total
Female	16	12	28
Male	2	1	3
Total	18	13	31

*Note: Participants were asked to select which gender they identify with (male, female, other, prefer not to say). The analysis of the transcripts are labelled and described based on the participant's selection. For the interpretation, those that identify with female are called women and those that identify as male are called men.

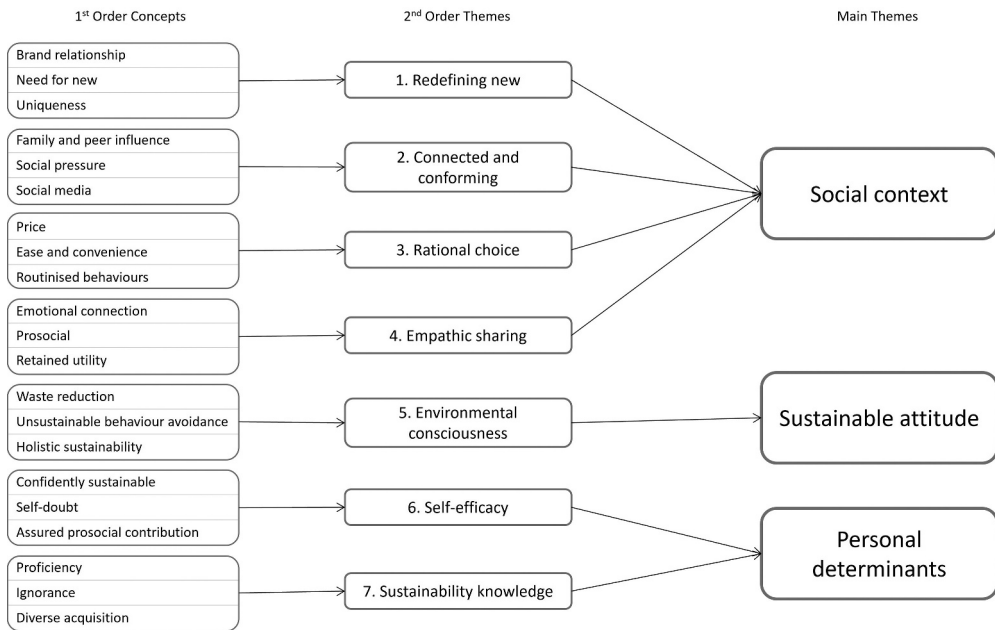


Figure 2. Data structure and main themes from thematic analysis.

were included to gain deeper insights. For example, participants were asked what made you donate this item/s? tell me about your feelings when you were in store? and, after the exchange, what were your feelings of the experience? The interview guide included questions on sustainability knowledge following Jensen's (2002) four dimensions: change strategies (how), causes (why), effects (what), and visions (where), designed to capture the multiple perspectives individuals may hold toward sustainability challenges.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Two researchers independently coded the same set of transcripts. Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion. High intercoder reliability was achieved ($\alpha = 0.77$ to $\alpha = 0.94$) on 10% of the data sample (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007) showing that the interpretations go beyond one individual's interpretation of the findings, therefore increasing confidence in the findings (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). NVivo software supported systematic coding. Inductive coding reflected the participants' own stories (Braun and Clarke 2006) which were thematised according to Corley and Gioia's (2004) methods. Figure 2 visually represents the data structure showing how the themes progress from first-order concepts to second-order themes and finally to higher level main themes. This provides the basis for conceptualising the findings to explore and demonstrate relationships between the themes and higher-level behavioural determinants described next.

Findings

When participants engage in second-hand luxury fashion exchanges, whether buying or selling, three key themes emerged from the data: social context, sustainable attitudes, and personal determinants.

Within the *social context* theme, four second-order themes emerged: (1) redefining new, (2) connected and conforming, (3) rational choice and (4) empathic sharing. Importantly, these second-order themes each show the mismatch between participants' sustainable behaviours and attitude, reflecting evidence of serendipitous sustainability (quadrant 4, [Figure 1](#)). The theme of *sustainable attitude* encompassed one second-order theme of (5) environmental consciousness. Importantly, environmental consciousness (comprising three first order concepts of waste reduction, unsustainable avoidance, and holistic sustainability), was the only second-order theme that demonstrates congruence between sustainable behaviour and attitude. This theme corresponds to the sustainability heroes in the sustainable consumer typology (quadrant 2, [Figure 1](#)). Finally, the *personal determinants* theme includes second-order themes of (6) self-efficacy and (7) sustainability knowledge. These seven sub themes and three main themes are complex and multi-dimensional. For example, when asked how she was first introduced to second-hand luxury shopping, one participant responded,

... it was actually one of my best friends. I was always commenting on her clothes. I was saying how ... do you have so many clothes and have the money to keep buying clothes and you know, make this an affordable lifestyle? These are all designer clothes, what's going on? She was like, 'oh Tatty's [luxury second-hand store] of course', so she kind of introduced me to that sort of world of recyclable fashion. (Female, 19 years old, C5)

We discuss the three themes – social context, sustainable attitude and personal determinants – next.

Social context

According to SCT, social context and the environment that surrounds a consumer helps determine what actions they take, when, and for what reasons (Bandura 1986). In the context of sustainable decision making, social influence can determine what role models and social facilitators drive a consumer's sustainable behaviour (Phipps et al. 2013). Yet in the context of a behaviour that occurs without a congruent attitude, social context may be even more influential in encouraging such behaviours. Social interactions were key to these consumers redefining their concept of what is 'new' and worthy in a good brand. When asked about their motivation to buy second-hand luxury fashion, one participant noted: *'it [the fashion]'d be difficult to get anywhere else. No one else will have it ... That's what I like about vintage stores as well ... the second-hand stuff, 'cause people are less likely to have the same things as you.'* (Female, 24 years old, C22). Social context also allowed participants to use luxury apparel to connect and conform with others via first-order concepts of peer influence and social media pressure. Some participants noted popularity of the item as their motivation for buying second-hand luxury fashion, *'I've seen it all over Instagram and it looks like a really cool, popular, stylish item'* (Female, 30 years old, C8). Others reported their direct encouragement to their peers: *'I always tell my friends please, come on, go to Tatty's or go to Encore ... '* (Female, 19 years old, C5).

The social setting also helped consumers rationalise the second-hand exchanges focusing on better price and convenience, empathetic sharing of apparel items and the retained utility from participating in second-hand exchange. Participants consistently communicated the sentiment that others might benefit from second-hand items, for

example when asked what motivated them to resell instead of another method of disposal this participant noted:

it was such a beautiful dress ... I just feel I couldn't put it in the bin when it's \$450. It definitely has to continue on its little life and make someone else happy, so it was the best thing for it and I wasn't going to put \$450 in the bin for no return. (Female, 23 years old, C10)

Sustainable attitude

This theme described participants who displayed a sustainable behaviour driven by a sustainable attitude, or environmental consciousness. In sustainable consumption, a decision to consume sustainably often includes responsible consumption (where consumers consider social, ethical, and environmental concerns), anti-consumption (activities that avoid, abandon, reclaim or restrict consumption) and mindful consumption (whereby consumers have a sense of awareness and consume in moderation) (Lim 2017). Participants' sustainable attitude emerged from the second-order theme of environmental consciousness, which emerged via three first-order concepts in the data structure, echoing Lim's (2017) sustainable consumption decision elements. The first-order concept of waste reduction focuses on consumers' intention to recycle, reduce their waste and embrace responsible consumption practices, exemplified by one participant when asked what motivated them to keep buying and selling second-hand luxury fashion: '*... and then I'll get sick of wearing that, so we'll go buy something new and then ..., the cycle just repeats ...*' (Male, 22 years old, C23). Consumers also showed unsustainable behaviour avoidance, where participants purposefully avoided fast fashion as an unsustainable behaviour (anti-consumption). When asked about how they felt post-purchase, one participant said '*there's that satisfaction of not buying something new and contributing to all of our issues with fast fashion ...*' (Female, 21 years old, C2). At times participants demonstrated a sustainability ethos and broader awareness of sustainability issues not specific to an item or behaviour. In holistic sustainability, participants appeared mindful of their consumption behaviours in many aspects of their life, beyond just fashion consumption.

Personal determinants

In SCT, personal determinants include a person's knowledge, expectations, attitudes and self-efficacy (Bandura 1986). Based on what emerged from the interviews, personal determinants here include (6) self-efficacy and (7) sustainability knowledge. The elements of self-efficacy that emerged from the interviews were: (1) positive or strong self-efficacy, where the participants are confident that their behaviour has the intended sustainable outcomes; (2) weak self-efficacy, where participants doubt if their sustainable behaviours contribute positively; and (3) assured prosocial contribution, where participants' self-efficacy only occurred regarding prosocial benefits of their behaviour. For some consumers, the goal was explicit. Reflecting on the cumulative impact of individual actions, one participant noted, '*... the more people that are doing that little bit, you know, on a scale that's a big change*' (Female, 24 years old, C1).

Sustainability knowledge, the second subtheme contributing to personal determinants, supports earlier research as an important influence of sustainable consumption behaviours and attitudes (Ok Park and Sohn 2018; Walser-Luchesi, Furst, and Rabeson 2025). Sustainability knowledge in this research included proficiency, where participants are aware of the sustainable impacts and broader sustainability issues and, ignorance, where participants were unaware, or gave a superficial identification, of sustainable behaviours. These participants' behaviours and attitudes clearly exemplified serendipitous sustainability; their choices were trend-driven rather than sustainability-motivated. When asked why they repeatedly purchased second-hand luxury fashion, one participant explained, 'I'm just doing what everyone else is doing' (Female, 24 years old, C12). The final first-order concept of diverse acquisition captures the varied ways participants access, respond to and engage with sustainability knowledge from diverse sources – businesses, peers, and social media.

Although some participants were confident that their sustainable behaviour benefits others, the social context was an overarching influence reinforcing the characteristics of serendipitously sustainable consumers.

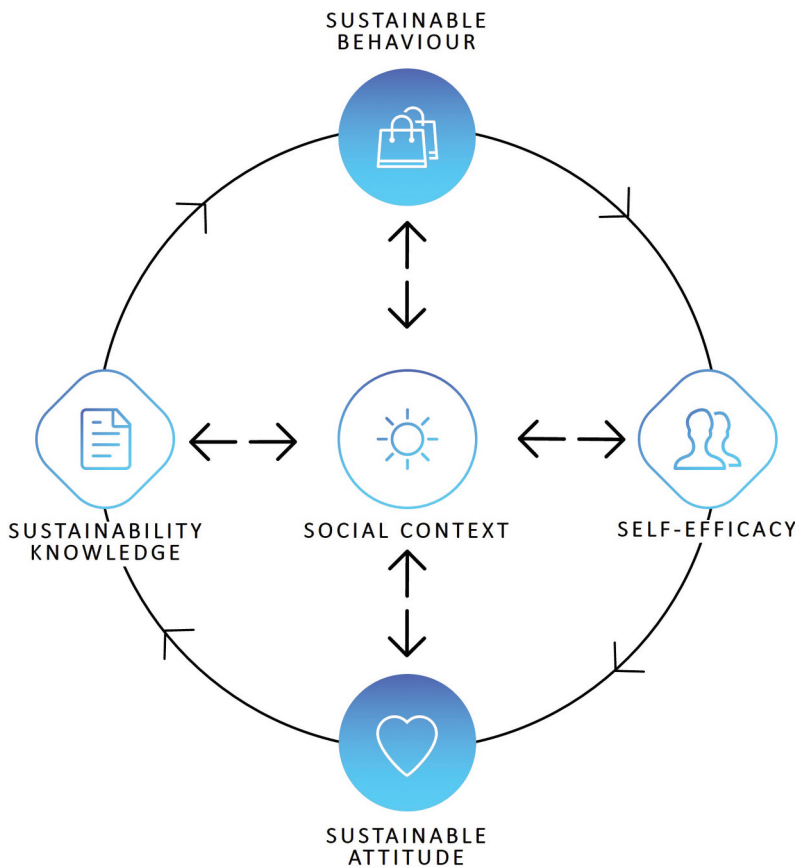


Figure 3. Social determinants of sustainable consumption model (SDSC) (source: authors' own work).

consumption due to peer influence, trend-based social signalling, and perceived social desirability, rather than environmental concern. In these cases, sustainable behaviour was facilitated through social reinforcement rather than attitudinal commitment.

Grounded in the themes that emerged from the data, the SDSC model conceptualises sustainable consumption as a socially embedded, cyclical process of behaviour rather than an individually driven, attitude-led one. Consumers may enact sustainable behaviours due to influences such as social media, peer networks, and the cultural normalisation of circular practices. The strength and configuration of the four determinants vary across individuals and contexts. For instance, sustainability heroes (quadrant 2, [Figure 1](#)) progress through the full outer cycle of the model ([Figure 3](#)), where sustainable attitudes, knowledge and self-efficacy mutually reinforce sustained action. However, within this group, depth of sustainability knowledge may differ, shaping the strength and reflexivity of consumption practices.

Crucially, the SDSC model offers an explanatory mechanism for both forms of misalignment identified in the typology (quadrants 1 and 4, [Figure 1](#)). Green thinkers (quadrant 1, high attitude, low behaviour) and serendipitous sustainable consumers (quadrant 4, high behaviour, low attitude) appear to follow shortened pathways through the model, being redirected through social context rather than completing the full attitudinal-behavioural cycle. When sustainable options are highly visible, socially rewarded, and easy to enact, consumers are more likely to adopt and maintain sustainable behaviours without developing strong sustainable attitudes or knowledge. In this way, the SDSC model conceptualises how marketplace structures and social environments can initiate and sustain sustainable action, offering a theoretical alternative for how sustainable consumption can persist in the absence of attitudinal change.

Conclusions, implications and limitations

This research advances understanding of sustainable consumption by shifting attention from what consumers believe to what they are enabled to do in retail environments. Rather than treating the sustainability attitude-behaviour gap as a mere psychological inconsistency (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019), this study shows that sustainable action is often structurally constrained by the marketplace itself. In doing so, we move beyond the notion of a behavioural *gap* and demonstrate further evidence for a behavioural *cap*, whereby consumers' capacity to act sustainably is shaped and limited by the external retail environment (Coffin and Egan-Wyer 2022). This perspective reveals that consumers frequently engage in sustainable actions not because sustainability is their goal, but because sustainable options have been made visible, easy, and socially supported.

This study makes three core contributions. First, we extend the attitude-behaviour gap literature by developing and empirically grounding a four-part sustainable consumer typology that clarifies the distinct nature of serendipitous sustainability in relation to established patterns of attitude-behaviour (mis)alignment. By conceptualising and evidencing consumers who act sustainably without holding pro-sustainability attitudes, this work furthers existing debates beyond the well-documented attitude-behaviour gap and introduces a more nuanced conceptual vocabulary for sustainable consumption research.

Second, drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, we demonstrate that serendipitous sustainable consumption is not driven primarily by values of environmental concern,

but by the availability, accessibility, and normalisation of sustainable actions within retail settings. This aligns with work that frames sustainable consumption as an infrastructural and contextual outcome, rather than solely an individual choice (Caruana, Carrington, and Chatzidakis 2016; Coffin and Egan–Wyer 2022). Our findings suggest that when sustainable options are made easy, visible, and socially supported, consumers enact sustainable behaviours even in the absence of attitudinal commitment. This reveals a powerful and previously underexplored pathway to sustainability in everyday retail practices. This has broad applications for retailing in the future as shoppers appear to respond to the ease and accessibility of sustainable options, as well as the social normalisation of the behaviour rather than being driven solely by green or sustainable consumer values (Haws, Page Winterich, and Walker Naylor 2014).

Third, we integrate these insights with our empirical results into a cyclical Social Determinants of Sustainable Consumption (SDSC) model that conceptualises how sustainable actions can be initiated, reinforced, and sustained without prior attitudinal alignment. The model contributes theoretically by extending social cognition into a retail consumption context and practically by providing clear guidance for marketers and retailers. Specifically, it identifies when and how sustainable choices can be rendered simpler, more visible, and more accessible, thereby embedding sustainability into routine market practices rather than relying on idealised green consumers. Collectively, these findings help reposition sustainability as something that can be designed into consumption systems.

Empirically, the study suggests that sustainability knowledge and self-efficacy operate as important, but not necessary, conditions for sustainable action (Lin and Hsu 2015; Walser-Luchesi, Furst, and Rabeson 2025). Each consumer determinant influences the others as well as informing the social context via the feedback loop of reciprocal determinism (Bandura 1986; Phipps et al. 2013). Where social context is strong, consumers may engage in sustainable practices such as second-hand luxury fashion consumption even without pro-sustainability identities. This finding is compelling because it reframes sustainable consumption as a socially orchestrated practice, rather than a purely ethical and individual act. We join the discussion in sustainability literature that the ‘coolness’ of sustainability lies not only in moral aspiration, but in belonging and social signalling (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019). Holding a sustainable attitude is not enough to create long-term behaviour change (Parvatiyar and Sheth 2023; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). Instead, we provide further evidence that the future of sustainable retail can be shaped by external factors (Coffin and Egan–Wyer 2022) including social context and economic settings, such as valuing second-hand resale and purchase of fashion. We suggest that consumers may adopt and maintain sustainable behaviours, often without developing strong sustainable attitudes or knowledge, when influences such as social media, peer networks, and the cultural normalisation of circular practices make sustainable options highly visible, socially rewarded, and easy to enact.

Managerially, the SDSC model could serve as a diagnostic and strategic tool. It allows retailers to identify pathways consumers may follow and to activate specific determinants through marketplace design, social proof, and norm-building marketing interventions. Rather than relying solely on education or attitude change, retailers can make sustainable actions default, desirable, and socially rewarded. However,

our findings also identify a critical vulnerability: serendipitous sustainable behaviours are fragile. The fluidity of social context is both a risk and an opportunity. If social context shifts, and supportive norms weaken, these behaviours may disappear. The managerial challenge, therefore, is to not only trigger sustainable action but to progressively cultivate congruent sustainable attitudes, knowledge, and self-efficacy that stabilises these practices over time, providing extra support to the trendiness of the behaviour. Further, once behaviours and attitudes reciprocate, more sustainable behaviour should flow onto other similar sustainable contexts. Social media and digital communities, supported by marketers who understand the key role of cultivating social context, can play a critical role in driving this change (Aycock, Cho, and Kim 2023). These social contexts amplify the voices of eco-conscious influencers and movements that challenge traditional consumption patterns, potentially boosting sustainability knowledge, and adding more links in the SDSC process toward building self-efficacy from a given sustainable behaviour such as second-hand luxury good consumption.

Finally, we acknowledge that second-hand luxury consumption remains debated as a sustainable project (Carranza et al. 2023; von Busch 2022). Although data saturation was reached, the sample size was small with predominantly female respondents. Future research should extend this work by using methods to capture insights from a larger diverse sample and incorporating other market actors, particularly retailers and service intermediaries, to examine how sustainability engagement occurs across the retail system. Understanding how businesses can intentionally scaffold social context represents a critical next step. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the future of sustainable retail may depend less on changing minds of consumers and more on redesigning marketplaces and marketing strategies so that sustainable acts can become more effortless and socially valued.

Note

1. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the argument that second-hand goods consumption may have a rebound effect by lowering the threshold for buying new, since resale offers an enrichment motivation for some consumers (Dion et al. 2025 ; Tari and Trudel 2023)

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