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# THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN ONLINE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES : A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FEMALE FASHION SHOPPERS

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# THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN ONLINE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FEMALE FASHION SHOPPERS

*Research full-length paper*

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## **Abstract**

*This qualitative study aims to understand sustainability's role in responsible consumers' Online Customer Experiences (OCEs). In this study, we focus on female fashion shoppers, and study three dimensions of their OCE: cognitive, affective, and social. Although online shopping and responsible consumer behaviour have increased tremendously, sustainability's role in OCE has not been studied before from the customer's perspective. The data consists of nine semi-structural interviews of Finnish female self-proclaimed responsible consumers and is analyzed with qualitative content analysis. The findings show that sustainability issues are present in all OCE dimensions, which are also all interconnected. In short, we find that OCE's cognitive dimension includes customers' evaluation of the online store's social and environmental sustainability as well as the product's sustainability, necessity, and longevity. The affective dimension of OCE includes a wide range of feelings arising from perceived sustainability and one's consumption choices. The social dimension includes one's self-presentation, social channels, and the socio-technical implementation of online stores and their social features. The findings are beneficial for online store providers and academics interested in studying sustainability and OCE from the information systems perspective.*

*Keywords: Online Customer Experience, Sustainability, Online Shopping, Customer Experience.*

## 1 Introduction

As shopping has moved from offline to online channels to an increasing extent, the role of e-retail and its information and communication technologies is now more prominent than ever before. Another ongoing major development is the consumers' shift towards more sustainable lifestyles (Fletcher, 2008; Joshi and Rahman, 2016). Because of these two developments in today's consumer behavior, a large amount of sustainable consumption takes place online (Leonidou et al., 2013). This leads to online customer experiences (OCEs) being increasingly affected by consumers' pursuit of sustainability. In short, OCEs are customers' subjective experiences formed by their interactions in online shopping environments (Trevinal and Stenger, 2014). According to current understanding, OCE has cognitive, affective, and social dimensions (Verhoef et al., 2009). Despite taking place in the online context, OCEs are based on human interaction, which is why they include social dimension (Bilgihan et al., 2016). These socio-technical shopping environments offer new possibilities for sustainable consumption. For example, wide selection of sustainable products, access to sustainability information, and possibilities to decrease carbon dioxide emissions of shopping are online shopping's sustainability advantages (van Loon et al., 2014; Rosqvist and Hiselius, 2016). Also, online shopping channels enable consumers to have more power over their consumption choices than ever before, which may push the producers towards more sustainable forms of production (Menguc et al., 2010; Mariadoss et al., 2016; van Riel et al., 2021). However, the questions of how these new socio-technical possibilities appear for responsible consumers and what is meaningful for them remain unclear. In order to better understand sustainability's role and potential in online shopping, we must focus on the customer's perspective and unravel how sustainability is present and reflected in their OCEs. Therefore, this study sheds light on sustainability's role in responsible fashion consumers' OCEs.

According to Webster's (1975) definition, responsible consumers are characterized by their consideration on public consequences of their private consumption, and by their pursuit of social change by using their purchase power. They have both environmental and social concerns, which they try to influence positively by their consumption choices (Roberts, 1993). For example, corporate social sustainability (Webster, 1975; Dyllick and Muff, 2016) and environmental sustainability (Dyllick and Rost, 2017; Sparks and Shepherd 1992) have traditionally been important for responsible consumers. Responsible consumers' consumer behavior has been researched from various perspectives, such as their evaluation of firms' sustainability (Galbreath and Shum, 2012; Liu et al., 2014; Chung et al., 2015; Mariadoss et al., 2016), the significance of a brand and its omnichannel stakeholders' sustainable values and images (Suki, 2013; Mariadoss et al., 2016; Wen et al., 2021), the presence of one's environmental self-identity (Van der Verff et al., 2013), and their willingness to pay for sustainable products (Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2011). Indeed, Choi and Ng (2011) propose that responsible consumers do not respond favorably to low prices when they have information about a company's weak commitment to environmental sustainability. However, sometimes inconsistencies occur between responsible consumers' ecological attitudes and actual consumer behavior (Joshi and Rahman, 2015). For example, online stores' quantity discounts may prompt one into buying something one would not necessarily have purchased otherwise, ultimately triggering negative emotions in consumers (Kemppainen et al., 2019). Consumers also report anxiety during online shopping about "throw-away culture," overconsumption, and the excessive production of single-use items (Kemppainen et al., 2019).

However, the literature on responsible online consumers remains scarce (Kemppainen et al., 2019). Therefore, this study's theoretical contribution is to fill the research gap on responsible consumers' OCEs. To our best knowledge, no prior literature focuses exclusively on the matter. According to Singh and Söderlund (2020), OCEs, in general, are not extensively researched, and further OCE research, especially from customer-dominant logic perspective, is needed (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Rose et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of a holistic understanding of OCE and its cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. Bilgihan et al. (2016) call for OCE research on different demographical groups. In this study's sustainability context, the female gender is of particular interest due to women's inclina-

tion towards sustainability (Bulut et al., 2017), online purchasing (Chou et al., 2015), and utilizing different shopping channels (Holkkola et al., 2022), when comparing to their male counterparts. Also, according to Fagih (2016) and Ranaweera (2005), gender moderates OCE's effects on consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, there seem to be some general differences in OCEs' significance for genders. In addition to demographical groups, Klaus (2013) and Verhoef et al. (2009) contend that OCE studies should focus on only one purchase category. In this study, we focus on fashion since, according to Statista (2022), clothing is the most popular online shopping category. In 2018, 57 percent of Internet users worldwide bought clothes online. The other popular online shopping categories included shoes and consumer electronics that had been bought by 47 % and 40 % of Internet users that year.

In this qualitative study, we analyze the role of sustainability in responsible female consumers' OCEs in online fashion shopping. The study's contribution to the literature is to recognize and define different ways on how sustainability is present in OCEs and its different dimensions. The findings of this study will contribute to research fields of information systems, marketing, and sustainability science. The findings are also useful in designing online store user interfaces that support consumers' responsible purchasing behavior. Our research question is: What is the role of sustainability in responsible consumers' Online Customer Experiences (OCEs) in cognitive, affective, and social dimensions?

The second section of our paper presents a literature review on previous research on OCE and its dimensions. In the third section, we introduce our research data and methods. Next, in the fourth section, we present the findings by the three dimensions. Finally, we conclude with the fifth section by providing discussion, practical implications, limitations of the study, and further research suggestions.

## 2 Online Customer Experience and its Dimensions

Online Customer Experience (OCE) is a comprehensive concept where interactions between the online shopping environment, consumers, and shopping practices produce a subjective experience (Trevinal and Stenger, 2014). OCE is a form of customer experience, which, in short, includes one's direct and indirect encounters with the firm. Customer experience is characterized by the customer's subjective responses, feelings, and interpretations, that evoke memories and combine with customers' previous experiences (Gentile et al., 2007). Thus, OCE involves a customer's mental perception of interactions with a company's value proposition in online channels (Klaus, 2013). Indeed, online stores are planned as immersive as possible, making purchasing an easy and quick task for customers. Things that contribute to these kinds of compelling online experiences (Dholakia et al., 2004) are suggested to include, for instance, ease of use, usefulness, enjoyment, and personalization of an online store (Bilgihan et al., 2016). Similar concepts to OCE, such as e-commerce user experience (Egger, 2001), online consumer experience (Liao and Keng, 2013), online shopping experience (Ahmad, 2002), and online service experience (Klaus, 2013), have also been researched.

In general, the research on customer experience has been criticized for focusing mainly on customer satisfaction (Palmer, 2010; Churchill Jr and Surprenant, 1982) and not on customer experience *per se* (Verhoef et al., 2009; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). For example, according to Cho and Park (2001), online customers should not be perceived as just shoppers but as visitors and information technology users. Singh and Söderlund (2020) have criticized the OCE research for forgetting the consumers' perspective and studying the successfulness of companies' service attributes, customers as passive receptors of value (Izogo and Jayawandhena, 2018). Focusing on consumers' individual processes in customer experience research is still rare (Lipkin, 2016), and these personal processes need more in-depth research (Bustamante and Rubio, 2017) with a holistic perspective (Ordenes, et al. 2014).

Verhoef et al. (2009) suggest that the customer experience consists of a cognitive, affective, social, and physical dimension. In OCE, the physical dimension is different from offline environments, as online shoppers encounter incoming sensory data in the forms of text, visual information, video, or audio de-

livery. Thus, instead of the physical dimension, cognitive (Novak et al., 2000; Gentile et al., 2007; Hoffman and Novak, 2009; Rose et al., 2012), affective (Gentile et al., 2007; Rose et al., 2012), and social (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Brun et al., 2017) dimensions have been widely recognized in OCE literature.

**The cognitive dimension** in OCE includes thinking and conscious mental processes, such as problem-solving and using creativity to meet shopping goals (Gentile et al., 2007). In addition to the processes that are traditionally perceived as cognitive, such as classifying, analyzing, and reasoning, the cognitive dimension also involves experiences that make the customers think and reflect, arouse their curiosity, awaken their creativity, and inspire them (Schmitt, 1999).

In the early OCE literature on cognitive dimension, the flow theory has been prominent. Flow theory determines flow as a cognitive state of challenge, arousal, and focus attention during online navigation (Novak et al., 2000). In OCE, the antecedents of the cognitive state of flow are suggested to involve high levels of speed, telepresence, skill, and challenge (Novak et al., 2000; Hoffman and Novak, 2009; Rose et al., 2012). Thus, the optimal balance between skill and challenge is suggested to produce cognitively compelling OCEs. Nevertheless, flow is only one aspect of the cognitive dimension of OCE, and evaluation of the online store's different attributes, such as perceived sustainability, is often involved in customers' OCEs (Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2011; Choi and Ng, 2011; Galbreath and Shum, 2012; Chung et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2014).

Research on possible gender differences in the cognitive dimension of OCE has resulted in some differences between female and male customers. Richard et al. (2010) present that when online shopping, women undertake detailed information gathering whereas men process information more heuristically. Additionally, the cognitive processes of evaluating and decision making in women's OCEs often include searching for information on more than just one online store (Ramakrishnan et al., 2014; Richard et al., 2010). Men, in turn, are suggested to want the information displayed on an online store to be relevant and sufficient, since they generally want their online shopping to be more straightforward (Ramakrishnan et al., 2014; Richard et al., 2010). Therefore, collecting an evaluating information from different sources seems to be more characteristic of women's OCEs.

**The affective dimension** of customer experience involves the customer's feelings, emotions, and moods about the company and one's consumption (Erevelles, 1998). According to Rose et al. (2012), the affective dimension in OCE can consist of the perception of control, the aesthetics, and the perceived benefits in an online store. In the research on OCE's affective dimension, emotions and feelings that customers experience while using the website are emphasized (Novak et al., 2000; Gentile et al., 2007; Rose et al., 2012). Online consumers have been found to interact with other consumers and companies emotionally (Bilgihan et al., 2016). Emotions present in OCE can also arise from one's own actions and valuation. These can include, for example, the consumer's negative feelings about one's unnecessary shopping, lack of self-discipline, and self-indulgence (Kemppainen et al., 2019).

Online shopping researchers have also studied what kind of things on online stores evoke which dimensions. For example, Chen et al. (2020) have found that perceived sustainability has a more significant impact on affective than cognitive customer engagement. Because customer engagement is associated with OCE (Mohd-Ramly and Omar, 2017), perceived sustainability might thus be emphasized differently also on the OCE's affective and cognitive dimensions. Also, rational customer engagement is suggested to be connected to affective customer engagement (Chen et al., 2020), which raises the question whether also OCE's affective dimension could be affected by other OCE dimensions.

**The social dimension**, in turn, includes the social aspects of customer experience, such as social presence in the store (Lee and Park, 2014) and the customer's social identity (Tajfel, 1981). Bilgihan et al. (2016) call for research on the social dimension of OCE. Furthermore, according to Kandampully et al. (2018), the social dimension of customer experience remains under-researched. Bustamante and Rubio (2017) have studied social identity's contribution to customer experience formation in physical shopping environments, which they perceive as highly social environments. Related to social identity, also self-presentation contributes to the customer experience. In general, self-presentation is behavior where one attempts to present themselves in a certain way to their audience of other people (Benoit, 1997). It is

part of a broader concept of impression management, which is an individual's conscious or unconscious strategic behavior in managing one's image and impression in social interactions (Goffman, 1956).

In online contexts, the social dimension of OCE consists of a customer's virtual interaction with the online store and other shoppers. The web, including online stores, has become a very human place (Bilgihan et al., 2016). For example, the online store's chat service and its human-like features have increased customers' satisfaction and trust (Kang et al., 2015; Lv et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2020). Customers can also interact with other consumers through comments, product reviews, and social media linkages (Klaus, 2013). These online social interactions allow customers to perceive themselves as community members. For example, online brand communities affect the customers and increase their engagement (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Heinonen et al., 2019). Besides these features and communities in online environments, social perceptions that affect customers' ideologies are also involved in OCEs in fashion shopping (Pandey and Chawla, 2018). These social perceptions involve, for example, social norms and trends intangibly present in online shopping (Kempainen et al., 2019).

The social dimension of OCE has also been researched from gender perspective. Generally, social interactions have been present especially in women's consumption (Kuo et al., 2013). On the other hand, in Pandey and Chawla's (2018) quantitative study, website interactivity is suggested to affect positively male customers' OCEs and to have no impact on female customers. However, in former OCE research, women have given more importance to websites' community-building activities than men did (Hwang, 2010; Faqih, 2016). Compared to men, women view fashion shopping more as a social activity, which is suggested to affect this higher emphasis on social dimension of OCE (Faqih, 2016; Venkatesh and Agarwal, 2006). Hence, researchers suggest that social aspects on fashion stores, such as social media elements and online chat, may significantly impact female customers' OCEs (Park and Cho, 2012; Hwang, 2010).

### 3 Data and Methods

A qualitative research approach was chosen, for our aim is to understand the customer's perspective in the formation of OCE. Thus, qualitative research approach is suitable for this customer-dominant logic with comprehensive research objectives (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Qualitative research approach was also chosen because it is suitable for studying topics that have not been researched before. Instead of trying to produce generalizable results, the aim of qualitative research is to find different perspectives with an in-depth take to the topic.

Our target group was responsible adult female consumers who have recent experiences in online fashion shopping. Female consumers were targeted because former studies suggest that responsible consumption is more common and more important for females (Nyrhinen and Wilska, 2012; Bulut et al., 2017). Due to our preconditions for the participants, we employed a purposive sampling technique (Guest et al., 2006; Morse et al., 2002) by recruiting potential participants on a social media platform. To ensure that the recruited participants met the preconditions, we accepted only the ones who considered themselves responsible consumers and whose last experiences in online fashion shopping had taken place within a year or were clearly in their memories.

The data collection was conducted by individual semi-structural interviews that follow a script but allow more free discussion and additional questions (Myers and Newman, 2007). The interviews took place at the end of the year 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were held technology transmitted. We interviewed nine female self-proclaimed responsible consumers aged 26–51 years. Following Fusch and Ness's (2015) determination on saturation, we continued the interviews until no new relevant information could be obtained. The participants are referred to as P1–P9 in this study, and their background information is presented in Table 1 below.

Participant	Age	Educational level	Living area
P1	26	Bachelor's degree	Urban
P2	27	Master's degree	Urban
P3	29	Master's degree	Urban
P4	48	Bachelor's degree	Urban
P5	31	Bachelor's degree	Urban
P6	46	Bachelor's degree	Urban
P7	31	Master's degree	Urban
P8	26	Bachelor's degree	Urban
P9	51	Master's degree	Urban

Table 1. Participants' background information.

In the interviews, the participants were asked about the themes of responsible fashion consumption, online fashion shopping, and different phases of their decision-making processes during the OCEs: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase behaviour (Kotler et al., 2017). These phases helped to cover the whole OCE chronologically. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview language was Finnish, and the citations in the next chapter are thus translated.

We analysed the data using qualitative content analysis. We based our analysis on the three above-described dimensions of customer experience drawn from the former literature: cognitive, affective, and social (Verhoef et al., 2009). First, we coded the data by these three dimensions recognized in previous research. After that, we used sub-codings for categorizing the different ways on how sustainability played a role in each of the dimensions. Finally, we were able to form the main themes under each dimension. The results are presented in the next section and summarised in Table 2 in section 5.

## 4 Results

The findings of this study show that sustainability plays a vital role as part of responsible female consumers' OCE in online fashion shopping. Next, the findings are presented in detail by cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of OCE.

### 4.1 Cognitive Dimension

The findings show that cognitive reflection on sustainability-related themes is an essential part of responsible consumers' OCEs. The participants repeated in their narrations that they had learned to be considerate compared to their former consumer behavior. This conscious consideration was present in many participants' OCEs and included thinking, pondering, and reflecting on the sustainability perspective. In short, we found that the sustainability issues were evaluated and made sense by considering 1) the sustainability of online stores and their products, 2) the necessity and suitability of the products, and 3) the longevity and the usability of the products. These three commonly evaluated themes are discussed below.

**The sustainability of the online store and its products.** The evaluation of online stores' and their products' sustainability included considerations of the sustainability information found on the online store. The participants demanded transparency and sufficient information to be provided on an online store's responsibility page. In these pages, the participants were interested in the brand's values, commitments, goals, rankings, as well as the company size and nationality. The participants evaluated the brand's own online stores and responsibly profiled multi-brand online stores as better options than "mass sales online stores". Regarding product information, the participants were interested in the products'



country of manufacture, the brand's production conditions, material production, production chains, and transportation. Accordingly, P3 explained her online shopping principles:

*"If there [on the online store's responsibility page] isn't much [information], then I don't usually buy, no matter how nice the clothes there would be, that much I always check. And of course I also recognize [...] already by judging the price, that if a garment has a certain price, then you know that it can't be responsible, so I of course evaluate these [prices] too."* (P3, 29 years)

Despite the positive emotions evoking from, for example, the looks and attractiveness of online stores' product images, participants reported considering the overall sustainability of the brand and its product origins in their OCEs. This consideration covered especially the information found on the online store's sustainability page. Also, as P3's quote demonstrates, the product's price was one of the factors used to evaluate sustainability. The citation above illustrates how considering the product's origin and sustainability takes place in responsible consumers' OCEs. The constant consideration of different sustainability aspects, ranging from transparency of product origin to prices that make sustainable production possible, was present in participants' OCEs. Sustainability, and its evaluation and inference, were also considered in one's actions and values as a consumer:

*"[...] the online store [where to buy] also must meet the [responsibility] criteria where I would like to spend my money, like as a consumer."* (P6, 46 years)

The participants consciously recognized their role as consumers, whose choices matter more broadly than just choosing a suitable product for their needs and pleasure. Thereby, many did not want to make purchases inconsistent with their opinions on the sustainable clothing industry. One's OCE can include sustainability criteria that one has reasoned and is thinking about when shopping online. For example, P6's sustainability criteria were essential to her evaluation of the store's sustainability. Instead of sustainability criteria, P5 described having "a kind of sustainability filter" that enables her "to ponder" whether the production of the clothes presented online is sustainable enough to get interested in those products.

In the participants' OCEs, evaluating the brand's and its products' sustainability took place by searching if there is sufficient responsibility information found on the page. Also, the payment intermediary and "all these legalities, like the GDPR and else" (P4, 48 years) of the webpage were described to increase the reliability and "technical responsibility" of the online store and customer experience. The consumers' sustainability evaluation present in OCEs also made participants suspect, doubt, and question the information displayed online:

*"[...] on the other hand, I may be a little hesitant about [green marketing], especially when it comes to larger companies, because nowadays it seems that all clothes, or most clothes, would be like made of some sort of recycled material or like that their existence is already somehow compensated. So at least for me it somehow raises suspicions that is this like the whole truth [...]"* (P1, 26 years)

What raised doubts in P1 were large companies, their compensation promises, and the sustainability measures that seemed too good to be true. The participants suspected if the online stores' green marketing is greenwashing. They questioned the truthfulness of the sustainability information on online stores, for example, the use of the word "organic".

**The necessity and suitability of products** for one's needs were also evaluated. Such evaluation was even more common among the participants than the evaluation of online store's and products' sustainability. In the narrations of the participants, their OCE included the evaluation of the product's necessity, suitability, and longevity from the sustainability perspective. The participants described how they have learned to consciously consider their purchases, to recognize and ignore external stimuli and needs, and to carry out their purchase processes slower. These careful considerations seemed take place during the OCEs, as P5 described the perks of choosing to shop online:

*"[...] The consideration of purchase decision is often possible, easier, and somehow more practical in an online store than in some brick-and-mortar shop. You can like look at a product from*

*a little bit of distance, and then you don't like have to immediately jump into the actual buying process, like the experience is different from if you go to a [brick-and-mortar] store somewhere, and when the product is concretely in front of you, then you somehow may feel that you should buy it, because you have already gone to the store, but in online [...] your own needs can somehow be like structured easier [...]" (P5, 31 years)*

P5 wanting to “structure her own needs” characterizes how tangibly the cognitive dimension was present in many participants’ OCEs. Being online, in contrast to a brick-and-mortar store, seemed to give the participants more space for consideration and composure when shopping.

**The longevity and usability** of products were also considered. Many participants reported having learned to purchase only the clothes they know they will also use. In terms of making well-considered and thus sustainable purchases, the participants reported also considering how well the evaluated clothes could go with their existing clothes, how classic and timeless the clothes are, and how long-lasting materials and quality they appear to have. P2 also considered the awareness of how one will eventually get rid of the product as a desirable part of responsible consumption.

## 4.2 Affective Dimension

The findings show that the pursuit of sustainability was affectively present in various ways in the participants’ OCEs. In their narratives regarding sustainability, the affective dimension included positive as well as negative feelings, such as contradiction and guilt. Also, the online store’s level of humanity and human-like features were described to affect the sense of responsibility, thus affecting perceived sustainability.

The positive emotions, such as happiness and satisfaction from acting in accordance with one’s sustainable values, were present in the participants’ OCEs. The satisfaction was described as “*knowing that you are making good choices*” when online shopping for responsible brands that “*don’t burden or load the environment, and, on the other hand, employ people so that they have the salaries they can really live on*” (P7, 31 years). Also, good measurement information available on “*independent brands*” products caused “*rejoice*” in P9 when online shopping. The thought that sufficient product information enables people to support these small, domestic, and sustainable firms affected positively P9’s OCE. Further, P5 described experiencing “*positive feelings*” during the whole customer experience, including the wait and arrival of the purchase. Her purchase process was long due to “*the weeks’ or months’ consideration*” of purchasing “*a responsible and possibly a more expensive garment*”. This long and considerate process of sustainable shopping made the whole OCE feel special and positive for her.

The positive emotions in the OCE could also “*fall flat*” if the feelings and images of the online store’s responsibility and humanity were somehow shattered. Being in a positive mood was important for responsible consumers in their pursuit of doing good by consuming, especially if sustainable products had more expensive prices. To maintain one’s positive mood, an ideal OCE was described to include a human-centered and individual customer service:

*“[...] my opinion is that definitely and especially if there is some extra in the price, then you have to do some kind of thinking process and like a consideration, that, ok, I’ll spend a bit more money on this, so of course you need also like to get good vibes from to who or what you give your money to. Usually, the customer service being kind of close to people, and customer service’s individuality, help with this.” (P3, 29 years)*

P3’s explanation implies that cognitively evaluating the brand and the garment to meet one’s responsibility requirements is insufficient. The affective dimension of the OCE is also needed to support the feeling of perceived responsibility. P3 also describes how “*if [an online store] is like cold and stiff and like too large corporate-like*”, “*it wastes the deepest purpose of trying to be [...] as ethical, responsible and close to people as possible, like being close to nature and to well-being*”. Despite taking place online, consumers’ affective and social desires for human-like features and services close to people remain. Also, after purchase, responsibility details, such as the packaging and “*how the product looks*

like when I take it from the package” (P5, 31 years) can be crucial for the OCE. Due to the many players contributing to the customer experience in an omnichannel environment, these parts may not even be in the online store’s hands. Still, they might shatter the customers’ feeling of overall sustainability:

*“[...] especially when it comes to responsible clothing, that the purchase may be like several hundred euros, so if the garment is sent, for example, in a bit scrambled through way, or as if the sending and package of the garment is, for example, somehow a bit weird or like feels cheap or somehow there is something badly wrong with it, so for example these may really affect you so that the buying process’s life-cycle falls flat at the end of the process [...]” (P5, 31 years)*

P5 demonstrated how the OCE formation does not take place solely in online environments. As stated above, she as a responsible consumer might affectively conclude an online store’s sustainability based on products’ packaging. Thus, the physical elements also contributed to the OCE’s production. The above citation suggests that OCE can also include features of omnichannel experience, where also other stakeholders, such as a separate packer, can later affectively impact on one’s image and memory of their OCE.

Contradictory feelings were also present in participants’ OCEs. Many participants had conflicting feelings about shopping for clothes in general: The joy from new clothes was contradicted by the guilt from unnecessary purchases, and the satisfaction from supporting responsible online stores was contradicted by yet remaining environmental impacts of producing new clothes, if compared to buying second-hand. These contradictory feelings in online shopping took place as feelings of guilt and regret after finishing one’s online purchase. Such feelings of guilt were present and detectable in the participants’ concrete examples and narratives. In their online shopping narrations, the participants used expressions describing the breakage of self-discipline, which seemed like a sign of their regret and dissatisfaction with their behavior. For example, P6 said that she “*erred to buy*” clothes also for herself when her daughter had been shopping in an unsustainable online store, from which P6 herself “*would certainly not make purchases*”.

In addition to contradictory feelings, the feelings of guilt were experienced during and after the OCE. The guilt, wretch, and distress were present in P6’s description as the feelings of “*consumer hangover*” and “*elitism*” during her OCEs, producing an unpleasant general atmosphere. In turn, P9’s guilty emotions seemed to take place and crystallize especially right after finalizing the purchase.

*“[...] I think it [the feeling when shopping online] is like a bit disgusting, or at least I get a more consumer hangover kind of feeling from it than if I would be in a [brick-and-mortar] store. It feels somehow so elitist to sit on your own sofa and to shop things, like I don’t too much, it is not the most entertaining way to buy a garment.” (P6, 46 years)*

*“[...] Well, if I’m honest, then after I pressed it, clicked that I accept the payment, then sometimes I get that feeling of regret and guilt, like ok, was this like truly necessary use of money and our common natural resources [...]” (P9, 51 years)*

### 4.3 Social dimension

In our findings, the social dimension of sustainability’s role in OCE was predominantly present in three themes. These themes were participants’ self-presentation as responsible consumers, the social presence in online stores, and the participants’ use of social channels as sources of information and inspiration. Self-presentation as responsible consumers was present in participants’ narrations. The participants cited their social identity as one of the reasons for buying clothes, and associated this with their self-presentation as responsible consumers. Clothes were thus seen as tools for shaping how others viewed them and for expressing one’s responsible values to this audience. Participants’ responsible identities were sought to be displayed and communicated through brands that are considered responsible. For example, P6 described her consumption as a means of self-expression, taking a stand, and influencing, which P4 linked to the choice of brands.

*“[...] there’s also that you want to communicate to others, of course, clothes show also what you think and support, like okay, that’s how people nowadays recognize a specific consumer, like from the brands that people use.” (P6, 46 years)*

*“[...] yes, you may also actually want to express your own values with them [clothes], so that this probably has more to do with what brands you choose [...].” (P4, 48 years)*

The self-presentation of one’s responsible identity was most evident in participants’ choice of brands. According to Paananen et al. (2022), customers engage with brands in different levels, depending on how highly they value the brand. The participants purchased responsible brands from the brands’ own online stores, or alternatively from online stores that bring responsible brands under one online store. Thus, the social desire to be seen as certain types of consumers was present in the OCE in choosing the online store and favoring brands commonly considered sustainable. The quote from P6 shows how the anticipatory awareness of the imagined audience and their “brand literacy” was present in the OCE. In addition to brands, P5 highlighted the choice of online stores in an educational sense, as she “*would not want to teach her children that clothes are bought from such [chain] stores*” (H5, 31 years). Thus, the participants’ OCEs were socially affected by other people, be them audience for one’s self-presentation or one’s offspring to show example to. This audience was not necessarily physically present when online shopping, but still seemed to be socially present, affecting one’s OCE.

Also, the social presence in the online store, including human-centered and personal service, affected participants’ OCEs. Social presence reinforced the perceived responsibility of an online store. It was viewed as characteristic for small, domestic, and responsible firms that the participants favored. P9 describes how she does not need a “*mass email*” from big corporations, but how the social presence in small, responsible producers’ online stores affects her OCE:

*“[...] The thing that I really find the most wonderful what many Finnish [domestic] small businesses do [...] that some even put a separate card in the package where it says hi P9, thank you, your purchase is important for us, which gives you such a good mood and like this. So yes, I have a little bit like started to expect like quite personal service [...] I think it is nice that kind of self-made feeling, personal feeling is also showing there [...].” (P9, 51 years)*

Social channels were also present in the participants’ OCEs, but their social side received relatively little attention in the interviews. P3 said that by belonging to online communities, such as a Facebook group for sustainable fashion, she actively raises her awareness of sustainability in her everyday life. She also said that she follows influencers dealing with the ethical clothing industry, and that these online communities influence which brands she favors. P4 highlighted Facebook groups of responsible consumers as well:

*“[...] Of course there are a lot of good groups on Facebook, for example, on ethical and ecological consumption, and generally on clothes and other things, so from there you like without even noticing may come across like some interesting brands, which you then go explore [...].” (P4, 48 years)*

Participants’ narrations about online communities were more related to new information and inspiration than, for example, the actual community and sense of belonging in online communities. For instance, in the above description of P4, the cognitive dimension seems more present than the social dimension. Thus, the social dimension seems to be the impetus for the cognitive inspiration and information retrieval phase in the OCE.

## 5 Discussion

This qualitative study focused on the role of sustainability in online customer experience (OCE) formation from responsible consumers’ perspective. To the best of authors’ knowledge, this study is the first to exclusively focus on responsible consumers’ OCE by utilizing the experiences of female fashion shoppers. Based on the interviews of nine Finnish female self-proclaimed responsible consumers on their online fashion shopping, we provide insights on how sustainability is present in the formation of

OCE in three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and social. The overview of the findings can be found in Table 2, after which we discuss the findings in the context of former literature.

<b>COGNITIVE DIMENSION</b>		
<p><b>Evaluating online stores' sustainability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sufficient and transparent sustainability information (production conditions, production chains and transportation)</li> <li>- brand's own sustainability commitments (values, sustainability goals, specific commitments)</li> <li>- the rankings of the brand</li> <li>- company size and nationality</li> <li>- questioning the truthfulness of sustainability information, the suspicion of greenwashing</li> <li>- reliable overall image (customers' privacy and payment security)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Evaluating products' sustainability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- socially sustainable price</li> <li>- country of manufacture</li> <li>- materials and their production</li> <li>- transportation emissions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Evaluating the necessity and suitability of the product</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- recognizing one's desires and the real needs</li> <li>- sufficient measurement information</li> </ul> <p><b>Evaluating the longevity and usability of the product</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- timelessness and classicism</li> <li>- the longevity of materials</li> <li>- imagining how well the garment will go with the clothes one already owns</li> </ul>
<b>AFFECTIVE DIMENSION</b>		
<p><b>Positive feelings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- happiness from sustainability</li> <li>- satisfaction with oneself</li> <li>- positive mood from personal and close-to-people customer service</li> </ul>	<p><b>Contradictory feelings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- positive feelings from supporting sustainable brands but negative feelings from purchasing new clothes</li> </ul>	<p><b>Negative feelings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-feelings of "consumer hangover"</li> <li>-feelings of "elitism"</li> <li>-negative mood from online store giving a cold, stiff, or distant feeling</li> <li>-negative feelings from unsustainable aesthetics</li> <li>-guilt from one's unnecessary or unsustainable purchases</li> </ul>
<b>SOCIAL DIMENSION</b>		
<p><b>Consciousness of the audience of one's consumption choices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-self-presentation as a responsible consumer (favoring brands that are commonly recognized as sustainable)</li> <li>-transmitting one's sustainable consumer behavior (children, other adults)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social presence on responsible online stores</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the positive effect of human-centered and personal service</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social channels and online communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- social media groups for responsible consumers</li> <li>- social media influencers for responsible consumers</li> </ul>

Table 2. The role of sustainability in responsible consumers' OCEs, summary of the findings.

**Cognitive dimension.** Based on our findings, sustainability's role in OCE's cognitive dimension is engaged with customers' information search, evaluation, concluding, questioning, consciously resisting the flow and stimuli, consciously using their purchase power, and using their imagination during their OCEs. In the following paragraphs, we capsize and discuss how exactly the pursuit of sustainability by these cognitive acts seems to take part in responsible consumers' OCE formation.

Firstly, responsible consumers evaluated online stores' social and environmental sustainability and their products' origins by checking the responsibility page of the online store and finding out about the production, materials, and the brand's sustainable values and commitment to them. Not surprisingly, this finding of responsible consumers' tendency to evaluate online stores' sustainability information and practices is consistent with former literature (Galbreath and Shum, 2012; Liu et al., 2014; Chung et al. 2015; Mariadoss et al., 2016). Thus, Richard et al.'s (2010) suggestion of female consumers' detailed information gathering is supported also in the case of responsible female consumers. In addition, the finding of responsible consumers ignoring the products whose prices they evaluate to be too low to be sustainably manufactured supports Choi and Ng's (2011) finding of responsible consumers ignoring attractively low prices when perceiving the company as irresponsible. This ignoring is part of conscious thinking of one's principles and criteria during OCE: what kind of an online store one wants to support. This is related to consciously using one's purchase power, like in Webster's (1975) and Roberts's (1993) definition of responsible consumers. Responsible participants sometimes also suspected and questioned the responsibility promotion they saw on online stores: this is an example of arousing one's curiosity (Schmitt, 1999) and own judgment during their OCE.

Secondly, our findings show that during their OCEs, responsible consumers weigh their personal needs for and use of the possible purchase. The OCE's compelling features (Dholakia et al., 2004) and fast-paced shopping flow (Novak et al., 2000) may contradict the responsible consumers' pursuit of considered and deliberate consumption. Based on our findings, responsible consumers constantly strive to recognize and ignore the external stimuli and needs, and to carry out their purchase processes slower.

Thirdly, the longevity and usability of the product are evaluated in responsible consumers' OCEs. This evaluation occurred in creative thinking, which belongs to the cognitive dimension of customer experience (Schmitt, 1999). For example, when evaluating if the garment is a good purchase that will be used, the consumers reported imagining how well the evaluated clothes could go with the clothes they already own. Also, the awareness of how one will eventually get rid of the clothing was perceived as part of responsible consumption, which again belongs to the cognitive behavior of imagining and problem-solving (Gentile et al., 2007). Thus, according to our findings, many cognitive processes regarding sustainability take part in responsible consumers OCE formation.

**Affective dimension.** Our findings show that sustainability's role in OCE's affective dimension includes both positive and negative moods and emotions. These moods and emotions concern online stores and one's own consumption. In short, these feelings arise from online stores' and products' perceived sustainability and aesthetics, from (in)consistencies in one's responsible values and behavior, and the level of personification and interaction in one's OCE. The following chapters discuss how these findings relate to former OCE literature.

According to our findings, negative emotions concerning online stores' perceived lack of sustainability affected OCE formation. Although cognitively evaluating the online store as responsible, the consumer's OCE could "fall flat" after affectively mediated unsustainability, such as the packaging's wasteful aesthetics (Rose et al., 2012). Consistent with Wen et al. (2021), we find that in OCE formation, responsible consumers are also sensitive to stakeholders' responsibility. The wasteful packaging lowering the customer's mood is an example of this as well. Therefore, the affective dimension of OCE can affect the cognitive dimension of perceived sustainability. This result seems to be consistent with Chen et al.'s (2020) finding that perceived sustainability affects has a greater impact on affective than cognitive dimension. On the other hand, also cognitively perceived sustainability affected customers' emotions and, thus, also the affective dimension of their OCE.

In addition to the online store's perceived sustainability, the responsibility of one's own consumption can cause negative emotions in consumers. Contradictory feelings, guilt, "consumer hangover", and "feeling of elitism" occur in responsible consumers' OCEs, if one's consumer behavior contradicts one's sustainable values. Joshi and Rahman (2015) and Kemppainen et al. (2019) have also found that inconsistencies in responsible consumers' values and behavior cause negative emotions. The guilt over the use of shared natural resources experienced during one's OCE can be explained by Webster's (1975) notion of responsible consumers taking public consequences into account in their private consumption. Based on our findings, also positive emotions arise from one's consumption during OCE. The responsible consumers' pursuit of a better world by using their purchase power (Webster, 1975) caused happiness and satisfaction in their OCEs. Also, online stores with human-centered and personal customer service improved the affective dimension of OCE and contributed to perceived sustainability. This result is consistent with Bilgihan et al.'s (2016) finding that online consumers interact emotionally with companies and favor personalized online stores. Thus, the social and the affective dimensions seem to be interconnected.

**Social dimension.** Based on our findings, the social dimension of sustainability's role in OCE is related to the social presence of online stores, consumers' online communities, and one's self-presentation. We find that responsible consumers appreciate social presence on online stores, such as chat service and personal customer service, because it increases trust for and responsible image of the store. This finding contradicts Pandey and Chawla (2018), who suggest that website interactivity does not affect female customers. According to our results, especially small surprises packed and sent with the product, such as hand-written cards that remind the consumers of the real people behind the online store, were highly appreciated. On the other hand, female customers have been found to generally value these social interactions in online shopping, regardless of one's responsibility (Hwang, 2010; Park and Cho, 2012; Kuo et al., 2013). Online brand communities are also suggested to positively affect customer engagement (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Heinonen et al., 2019). According to our findings, online communities for responsible consumers can be a source of information and inspiration in one's consumption, thus contributing to the OCE formation. Therefore, the social dimension affects how consumers find and process information, which again is related to the cognitive dimension of OCE.

The social dimension is also present in responsible consumers' OCEs in their impression management. By self-presentation, responsible consumers pursue to signal their responsible social identity with responsibly perceived brands to their audience. This pursuit demonstrates the presence of one's responsible self-identity (Van der Verff et al., 2013), and its impact on OCE by causing consumers to favor brands commonly recognized as responsible and thus socially acceptable in the eyes of their audience. This result is consistent with the notion of the presence of social norms and trends in OCE (Kemppainen et al., 2018; Pandey and Chawla, 2018). Thus, we suggest that responsible consumers want to belong to a community of like-minded responsible consumers and that this audience is mentally present in responsible consumers' OCEs. Therefore, shopping online seems not to remove the importance of the social dimension in one's customer experience.

Our findings show that regarding sustainability, all three dimensions are interconnected and contribute to OCE formation. The role of sustainability in the OCE formation is pervasive and, as noted, covers cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. At the beginning of this section, Table 2 summarizes the new information our findings provide: how the cognitive processes, the affective moods and emotions, and the social dimension are present in responsible consumers' OCEs.

## 5.1 Practical implications, limitations of the study, and future research

Based on our findings, we encourage online retailers to improve their environmentally and socially sustainable practices and provide information on these actions and commitments both on a responsibility page and product pages. Sustainability and transparency of product chains improves consumers' cognitive and affective OCE, and once the brand and its online store have reached a responsible image, they become also socially desirable for responsible consumers. Thus, by communicating transparently and

in a human-centered way about sustainability practices online stores can create value and increase social and environmental sustainability. Social presence and human-centered features throughout the OCE support the retailers' responsible image and customers' positive mood needed for their investments.

This study has certain limitations that leave opportunities for future research. Firstly, because of the qualitative nature of this study, the findings involve participants' subjective experiences and are not to be generalized as such. Secondly, since the research gap on sustainability's role in OCE, this study outlines several themes summarized in Table 2, but is not able to discuss all the findings deeply enough. The weight of the recognized themes and dimensions should be researched quantitatively. The themes and dimensions should also be qualitatively further researched with a narrower scope, for example self-presentation and the social presence on responsibly perceived online stores. In addition, sustainability's role in omnichannel customer experience should also be researched.



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