Submission received: 13th of July 2025
Revised: 10th of August 2025
Accepted: 6th of September 2025

SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS IN POLAND: ANALYSIS OF NEEDS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Agnieszka Wójcik[1]

Background and Objective: The fashion industry faces mounting pressure to integrate sustainable development principles into its business models. While global discourse often emphasises the self-sufficiency of born sustainable enterprises, little is known about the contextual challenges these brands face in Central and Eastern Europe. This study aims to identify the perceived needs and expected institutional support mechanisms among micro, small and medium-sized fashion brands in Poland operating under a born sustainable model.

Study Design/Materials and Methods: The study is grounded in the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) on sustainability transitions. A qualitative research design was applied using in-depth interviews (IDI) with 10 representatives of fashion MSMEs that self-identify as sustainable. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code and interpret the data.

Results: The findings indicate six key areas of expected support: financial assistance, infrastructure access, systemic integration of support measures, consumer education, collaborative networks, and simplified application procedures. Respondents emphasised that the absence of coherent, predictable support mechanisms significantly impedes business development. Contrary to international narratives, external institutional conditions were seen as critical to long-term viability.

Practical Implications: The study highlights the need for more integrated, flexible and long-term public policy instruments tailored to the realities of small sustainable brands. Better alignment between institutional frameworks and business practice can improve both economic performance and the social impact of sustainable fashion.

Conclusion and Summary: The study concludes that born sustainable brands in Poland require not only internal motivation, but also a supportive ecosystem to scale and sustain

[1] SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Management and Quality Sciences, aw81843@doktorant.sgh.waw.pl / agnieszkawojcik1998@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-4643-9428

DOI: 10.19253/reme.2025.01.003

their operations. The results offer direction for comparative research and public policy development.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, small enterprises, public support, institutional barriers, circular economy

JEL classification: L26, M13, Q56

Paper type: research study

1. Introduction

The contemporary fashion industry is facing mounting pressure to align with sustainable development imperatives at both the international and national levels. Consumer expectations, legal regulations, and evolving social norms are increasingly compelling companies to take action aimed at reducing their environmental impact and improving labour conditions within supply chains. In this context, the question of what conditions foster the growth of sustainable business models—particularly those of fashion brands that integrate environmental, social and ethical considerations into their strategies—has gained particular relevance.

In Poland, as in other Central and Eastern European countries, initiatives that align with the principles of sustainable fashion tend to be fragmented and are often driven by grassroots efforts. However, there is a notable lack of systemic support mechanisms that would account for the specific characteristics of this sector and the needs of the entities operating within it. To date, the academic literature has devoted little attention to analysing the concrete barriers faced by companies seeking to implement sustainable strategies, or to reflecting on the types of support—be it institutional, financial or advisory—that could effectively foster their development.

The aim of this article is to identify the needs of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the Polish fashion market with regard to the implementation of sustainable development strategies, and to propose potential support mechanisms that could address these needs. The article is based on an analysis of empirical material gathered through in-depth interviews conducted between February 2024 and February 2025 with owners and decision-makers. Particular attention is given to the experiences of practitioners and their assessment of current and potential forms of support offered by public institutions and business support organisations.

The author's intention is to present the perspective of entities operating within local conditions and to propose solutions that could facilitate the development of sustainable fashion brands in Poland. The article adopts an exploratory approach and aims to serve as a starting point for further research into policies supporting the sustainable transformation of the fashion sector at both the national and regional levels.

2. Literature Review

Contemporary environmental, social and economic conditions pose one of the most profound transformational challenges to the fashion sector among all branches of industry. In light of growing regulatory pressures, increasingly conscious consumer attitudes, and the escalating climate crisis, it has become imperative to radically redefine the prevailing models of production, distribution and consumption (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Gardetti & Muthu, 2014). Once considered one of the most resource-intensive and carbon-emitting sectors of the economy, the fashion industry is now increasingly becoming a space for the implementation of circular economy solutions, responsible supply chain management, and ethical production practices (Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Pal & Gander, 2018).

MSMEs play a particularly important role in this transformation, especially those that operate from the outset in the spirit of being "born sustainable". By integrating environmental, social and ethical objectives into the core logic of their business operations, such enterprises represent an alternative to the dominant growth model focused solely on profit maximisation (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011; Bos-Brouwers, 2010). In Poland, an increasing number of brands follow this logic, grounding their operations in locality, transparency, short supply chains, and minimising environmental impact (PARP, 2021). However, their development takes place under conditions that are not always conducive to the long-term viability of such models. Challenges include limited access to tailored financing, a lack of systemic advisory services, and difficulties in scaling without compromising authenticity (Klewitz & Hansen, 2014; Bocken et al., 2014).

According to the Resource-Based View (RBV) and its ecological extension, the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV), the competitive advantage of sustainable firms stems primarily from intangible and hard-to-replicate resources such as founders' commitment, organisational identity, and relational capital (Barney, 1991; Hart, 1995). Research conducted in the Italian context confirms that the foundation of "born sustainable" business models lies in the intrinsic motivation of the founders and the pursuit of building a company's "green DNA", independent of regulatory incentives (Dicuonzo et al., 2020; Vecchi & Colucci, 2023). Similarly, analyses conducted in Poland (Murzyn-Kupisz et al., 2023) suggest that sustainable fashion initiatives are largely rooted in creativity, local embeddedness, and personal engagement—despite having limited access to systemic support instruments.

In the academic literature, systemic approaches to implementing sustainable innovation are gaining traction. Of particular relevance in this context is the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), which examines the interactions between the micro (individual organisations), meso (intermediary institutions, networks) and macro (policy, regulatory and cultural frameworks) levels as essential to driving lasting change in the sector (Geels, 2002; Smith et al., 2005; Trevisan et al., 2023). As numerous studies have shown, bottom-up initiatives can only be effective and sustainable when accompanied by coherent, long-term and multi-faceted institutional, technological and educational support (Utaminingsih et al., 2023; Klewitz & Hansen, 2014).

In parallel, technological advancements—including artificial intelligence, digital tools, and process automation systems—offer new opportunities for advancing the circular economy. However, the practical application of such technologies by MSMEs remains limited and requires further specification and exploration in research (Palamutcu, 2017).

The literature review highlights a persistent gap in in-depth analyses of support mechanisms for sustainable fashion brands operating in Poland. Despite a growing number of enterprises declaring alignment with sustainability values, there is still a lack of studies aimed at identifying their actual needs and experiences in relation to the institutional ecosystem. The evolving socio-economic landscape and emerging challenges suggest that existing support models may be insufficient or ill-suited to the specific nature of these entities. This study aims to address this gap by analysing the needs of selected brands operating in the Polish market and identifying directions in which effective mechanisms could be developed to support their continued growth.

3. Methodology

The objective of this study was to identify which support mechanisms are perceived by sustainable fashion brands as the most desirable and appropriate in the context of operating under a “born sustainable” business model in Poland.

The notion of “slow fashion” is frequently employed in the literature to denote sustainable approaches in the fashion sector (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). While the present article adopts the concept of “born sustainable”, the two terms are closely related, with “slow fashion” capturing primarily the consumer-facing dimension of sustainability (durability, conscious purchasing, repair), whereas “born sustainable” emphasises the organisational level of firms that embed sustainability into their core identity from inception. Both concepts are relevant to the present study, and their interplay highlights the importance of terminological precision.

In particular, the research focused on the types of support—financial, institutional, educational, infrastructural or promotional—expected by MSMEs whose business strategies have incorporated sustainable development goals from the outset. The study aimed to capture both the subjective assessments of entrepreneurs regarding systemic barriers and gaps, as well as their recommendations for potential actions to be undertaken by public institutions, entrepreneurship support organisations, and industry partners.

The research sample consisted of micro, small and medium-sized fashion brands actively operating in Poland, which explicitly identify themselves as sustainable. This self-identification was evident in both their communication strategies (e.g. websites, social media profiles) and their declared values and business practices, including local production, supply chain transparency, carbon footprint reduction, and educational initiatives. Recruitment was conducted through an analysis of public sources—primarily online marketplaces and social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok—where companies clearly positioned themselves as sustainable brands. Seventy enterprises were initially selected based on their self-definition as sustainable in various forms of media. The final study involved ten representatives of these enterprises (owners, managers and designers) who met the above criteria (Respondents). A qualitative research approach was employed, using semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs).

The collected data were subjected to content analysis following a thematic analysis approach as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process involved the transcription of the interviews, repeated readings of the research material, the coding of text segments, and the identification and aggregation of recurring themes. This process led to the extraction of core categories of needs and expected support mechanisms, which were then compared with findings from the literature review and industry reports. Such a triangulated approach enabled a deeper understanding of the gap between existing policy instruments and the realities faced by sustainable fashion brands operating in Poland.

To ensure a nuanced and multifaceted perspective, the study utilised two interview formats: some interviews were conducted in an unstructured format, while others followed a structured format based on a pre-designed questionnaire. Four unstructured interviews aimed to explore the free-flowing narratives of entrepreneurs, allowing for in-depth insights into their individual experiences, interpretations and reflections on operating within a “born sustainable” model. This exploratory approach facilitated the identification of key thematic and problem areas, which were subsequently used as a basis for the structured interview guide. The remaining six interviews were conducted using the pre-designed standardised questionnaire, enabling the comparison of responses across critical analytical domains such as the identification of development barriers, institutional support needs, experiences with existing assistance programmes, and proposals for new support instruments.

The respondents in the study were individuals holding ownership or managerial positions within enterprises, responsible for making key strategic decisions. The sampling design thus made it possible to capture the perspectives of decision-makers who not only oversee day-to-day operations, but also determine the long-term directions of brand development and sustainability strategies.

Two distinct models of business operation were identified. The first, represented by a single respondent (R6), was characterised by the full integration of all stages of the business process within a sole proprietorship. R6 independently managed the acquisition of materials, the design and production of garments, as well as sales, marketing, and website administration. A particularly noteworthy element of this model was the method of sourcing raw materials: the respondent obtained them from private individuals, responding to advertisements posted on online forums and social media. This represents an example of innovative and community-based resource management. Such an organisational model allowed for complete control over the production process and brand communication, while simultaneously building identity around the principles of recycling and material reuse.

Table 1. Classification of Respondents

Code	Main Activity
Unstructured Interview	
R1	Women's clothing
R2	Women's clothing, Accessories
R3	Women's clothing, Children's clothing, Accessories
R4	Women's clothing
Structured Interview	
R5	Women's clothing, Men's clothing
R6	Accessories
R7	Women's clothing
R8	Women's clothing
R9	Women's clothing
R10	Women's clothing

Source: compiled by author.

The second model, dominant among the remaining respondents (R1–R5, R7–R10), relied on collaboration with external partners. These enterprises cooperated with local sewing workshops and subcontractors responsible for carrying out particular stages of production, while also maintaining close relationships with companies supplying essential business components (e.g. cardboard boxes, labels, packaging). Such cooperation was largely long-term and network-based, with business relations developed and sustained through repeated transactions, often reinforced by trust rooted in local social ties. This model enabled entrepreneurs to concentrate on design, marketing, and brand building while transferring part of the production-related risks and costs to specialised partners.

Including both operational models in the sample—complete self-sufficiency (R6) and network-based cooperation with external entities (R1–R5, R7–R10)—allowed the study to capture diverse adaptive strategies employed by micro and small enterprises in the sustainable fashion sector. This heterogeneity of the sample enriched the analysis, providing deeper insights into both individual and systemic conditions shaping the functioning of born sustainable brands in Poland.

4. Results

An analysis of the Respondents' statements revealed a set of clearly articulated expectations regarding institutional support mechanisms, which—in their view—should be tailored to the specific conditions of operating under a born sustainable business model. Although the specific demands varied in detail, they could be grouped into six main thematic areas: access to financing, infrastructure availability, systemic approaches, public education, network-based support, and the simplification of application processes.

The most frequently mentioned demand was financial support—both in the form of direct investment grants and in the form of tax relief or funding for socially engaged initiatives. Respondents highlighted the challenges associated with high mandatory contributions (e.g. to the social security system), as well as the lack of available programmes genuinely accessible to small enterprises or aligned with their specific business profiles [R4: "What I fear most is the moment when I have to start paying full social security contributions…"; R8: "There's simply no funding for that."]. Notably, even those Respondents who had applied to EU or R&D funding programmes emphasised the lack of meaningful support during the implementation stage [R7].

The second recurring theme was the removal of infrastructural barriers—particularly the need for access to publicly owned spaces (municipal or state-owned), which could facilitate stationary operations such as showrooms, boutiques, or cooperative spaces. Respondents assessed commercial rental costs as a major obstacle to development [R8: "I'd love to have my own boutique… but renting space is just completely out of reach."].

Responses also revealed a pronounced need for a systemic approach to support—one that moves beyond isolated grant-based projects to combine financial assistance with advisory and strategic support. Respondents emphasised a lack of understanding from public institutions regarding the nature of their operations, as well as the rigidity of programmes that fail to recognise innovation as inherently risky and processual [R7: "The main issue is the pace of these projects, and the lack of understanding of what innovation actually is…"; R10: "Support should combine financial and advisory components…"].

Another area highlighted by Respondents was public education, seen as a crucial component of the institutional environment conducive to the growth of sustainable brands. Entrepreneurs noted that their efforts were significantly hampered by the lack of consumer awareness regarding the environmental and social impact of fashion, and that educational campaigns could strengthen their market position [R4: "Education is desperately needed."; R8: "People need to become more aware."].

Respondents also expressed a strong interest in increased collaboration among brands—through the creation of collectives, joint initiatives, or networks involving local partners, sorting facilities, or manufacturers [R1: "I source my materials from sorting centres…"; R2: "It's a local partnership as well…"]. Such initiatives were seen as ways to facilitate knowledge sharing, reduce costs, and improve access to shared resources.

The final thematic category concerned the need for support in building know-how and simplifying application procedures. Participants expressed frustration with the high entry barriers to grant programmes and the often limited outcomes despite significant investments of time and resources [R6: "It cost a lot of money and energy… and in the end, nothing came of it."].

The data collected suggest that the expectations of born sustainable enterprises extend beyond traditional support frameworks and encompass both material instruments and broader systemic transformations. Critical to their development is not only the provision of financial resources, but also the creation of institutional conditions that promote the long-term visibility and viability of sustainable brands in both market and societal contexts.

Table 2. Desired support mechanisms postulated by Respondents.

Support Mechanism	Respondents
Financial support (grants, tax relief)	R4 ["What I fear most is the moment when I have to start paying full social security contributions… and that's coming soon—this is the hardest part for me."]; R4 ["…it would help us… grants or some kind of tax relief… EU or government grants, or financial support for opening a tailoring workshop that would educate the community or offer repair services."]; R6 ["We tried a few years ago, but preparing the application cost a lot of money and energy… and in the end, nothing came of it."]; R7 ["…there are various EU-funded projects we also participate in, such as R&D programmes—in the sense that we apply—but no one really supports us."]; R8 ["I was interested, and we really wanted to get funding… there's simply no money for that."]; R9 ["I think funding, for example, would be a great idea and a useful solution."]
Access to municipal/ state-owned premises	R8 ["I'd love to have my own boutique… but renting space is just completely out of reach."]

continued tab.2

Systemic approach to support	R7 [“The main issue is the pace of these projects, and the lack of understanding of what innovation actually is—in the sense that innovation involves a high degree of risk.”]; R9 [“…municipal spaces that the city could… offer to such brands.”]; R10 [“Support should combine financial and advisory components, enabling brands to access grants and experts…”]
Public education	R4 [“Education is desperately needed.”]; R5 [“Fashion Revolution Poland and influencers are a form of support for brands.”]; R8 [“Such initiatives… to raise public awareness.”]
Creating collectives and joint initiatives	R1 [“I collaborate with one of the largest sorting centres… I simply source materials from there.”]; R2 [“…those who manufacture their products often engage in local cooperation—producers, entrepreneurs we know…”]; R3 [“I’m looking for an investor now, but finding one for this kind of business is difficult.”]
Support in building know-how	R5 [“I was thinking… about creating a collective of sustainable brands.”]; R7 [“…the issue is institutional know-how—whether public institutions can recognise where the potential lies…”]

Source: compiled by author.

5. Limitations

As with any empirical research, this study has certain limitations that need to be considered when interpreting its results. First, the research sample was relatively small and purposively selected, comprising ten representatives of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises that self-identified as sustainable. Such a sampling approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the experiences and needs of the examined group, but at the same time it limits the possibility of making generalisations about the entire fashion sector in Poland. The findings should therefore be treated as exploratory, serving as analytical insights and inspiration for further studies rather than as a basis for broad generalisations.

Another limitation concerns the exclusive focus on the perspective of owners and managers responsible for strategic decision-making within their enterprises. This provided a detailed view of the opinions of key decision-makers, who play the most significant role in shaping the development of brands, but it excluded other relevant perspectives—most notably those of employees and consumers. Given that the subject of the study was enterprises, this focus is justifiable; however, it should be emphasised that the consumer perspective is of critical importance for the development of the sustainable fashion market. Previous research has shown that consumer attitudes and behaviours are crucial in determining the success of sustainable business models (Niinimäki, 2010; Joy et al., 2012 McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Incorporating this dimension into future research could significantly broaden the analytical context and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the sector.

A further limitation is related to the chosen methodology, which was based on qualitative in-depth interviews. This approach enabled the collection of rich, multidimensional narratives and provided insights into the complexity of entrepreneurs' experiences; however, it does not allow for the statistical verification of the findings. Consequently, the ability to generalise the results remains limited. This study should therefore be regarded as a preliminary step, paving the way for more extensive research using larger samples and mixed-method approaches that integrate both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into the barriers and needs of Polish *born sustainable* brands, its limitations point to the necessity of further research. Particularly promising directions include the inclusion of consumer perspectives, the expansion of the sample to include enterprises from other industries, and comparative analyses in an international context, which together would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the conditions shaping sustainable business models across different socio-economic environments.

6. Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study provide valuable empirical data that deepen the understanding of the actual needs of sustainable fashion brands operating in Poland. Unlike some Western studies—particularly those conducted in the Italian context (Dicuonzo et al., 2020; Vecchi & Colucci, 2023)—participants in this study placed significantly greater emphasis on the need for systemic and multidimensional external support. Whereas foreign research often portrays born sustainable brands as self-reliant and highly motivated entities operating despite limited institutional support, Polish respondents stressed that without access to adequate and predictable support mechanisms, further development becomes highly constrained.

At the level of similarities, both cases reveal a shared conviction that sustainable brands function as values-driven initiatives, led by individuals with strong environmental and social engagement. Much like in the aforementioned Italian studies, Polish respondents demonstrated high awareness of the impact of their activities on the environment and society, and expressed a strong commitment to consumer education. However, while the Italian research highlights internal organisational resilience and individual coping strategies, the Polish findings underscore a pronounced need for systemic institutional support to ensure the stability and continuity of operations.

In this regard, the present findings align with the conclusions of Murzyn-Kupisz et al. (2023), who point to a misalignment between existing forms of public support and the specific needs of small, local initiatives in the creative and sustainability sectors. Respondents in this study identified not only financial barriers (such as the lack of micro-grants, high social contributions, and the unavailability of tax incentives), but also structural challenges: limited access to municipal spaces, fragmented assistance programmes, and a lack of integration between financial, advisory and promotional support. One particularly salient demand—largely absent from earlier studies—was the need to simplify application procedures and improve their transparency, indicating a procedural barrier that may discourage small enterprises from seeking available resources.

Although this study was oriented towards the perspective of enterprises, the respondents' statements clearly highlighted the consumer dimension—particularly the need for education and for raising social awareness of the environmental impact of fashion. Many participants emphasised that even the most innovative business models cannot be sustained unless they are supported by changes in consumer attitudes. These findings are consistent with recent research indicating that the success of sustainable brands largely depends on the willingness of consumers to make more conscious purchasing decisions (Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011; Henninger, Alevizou & Oates, 2016; Park & Lin, 2020).

The literature, however, reveals significant ambivalence among consumers. On the one hand, they increasingly declare support for the idea of sustainable development and even a willingness to pay a premium for eco-friendly products; on the other hand, their actual consumption practices still largely align with the logic of fast fashion (Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Ozdamar Ertekin, Atik & Murray, 2020). This discrepancy between declarations and behaviours is referred to in the literature as the "attitude–behaviour gap", which represents one of the greatest challenges to the further development of the sustainable fashion market (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Kumar, Prakash & Kumar, 2021).

From the perspective of the surveyed enterprises, this gap translates directly into difficulties in scaling their operations and building stable demand. Respondents noted that the absence of systemic educational initiatives means that the efforts of individual brands remain fragmented and fail to bring about lasting changes in consumer habits. However, studies conducted in recent years suggest that well-designed information campaigns and educational programmes can significantly influence purchasing decisions, particularly among younger generations (Geiger, Fischer & Schrader, 2018).

Including the consumer perspective in future research therefore appears essential to fully capture the mechanisms shaping the development of the sustainable fashion market. Combining supply-side analyses (enterprise conditions) with demand-side insights (consumer attitudes) would not only enable a better understanding of the barriers facing the sector, but also provide valuable guidance for designing more effective public policies and brand communication strategies. Importantly, the analysis also revealed a distinct need for collaboration among brands and the creation of network-based environments (such as collectives, platforms, or local joint initiatives) that could strengthen both business development and operational resilience. While international studies have touched on networking primarily in the context of local manufacturing clusters, the Polish context was characterised by a more relational, soft-networking approach—grounded in shared values, resource-sharing, and mutual support.

It should be emphasised that some of the barriers reported by the respondents are not specific to the fashion sector but reflect broader systemic challenges faced by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Poland. In particular, high non-wage labour costs remain one of the difficulties most frequently cited by entrepreneurs across various industries. According to Eurostat data, in December 2024 the share of non-wage costs in the total labour cost in Poland amounted to 18%, placing the country above the EU average in this respect (Eurostat, 2024). At the same time, the Labour Cost Index (LCI) reached 159.5 points in the first quarter of 2025 compared to 155.5 in the previous quarter, confirming the upward trend in the financial burden borne by employers (TheGlobalEconomy, 2025).

Although the overall cost of labour in Poland—averaging €17.3 per hour in 2024—remains significantly lower than the EU average of €33.5, the rising fiscal and social security contributions are particularly burdensome for micro and small enterprises, limiting their investment capacity and hiring potential (Successful Investing in Poland, 2024). The findings of this study are consistent with reports by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP), which identify labour costs and the complexity of administrative procedures as some of the key barriers to MSME growth (PARP, 2022).

Future comparative research that includes other industries would therefore make it possible to determine which barriers are universal and systemic—affecting the broader business environment—and which are specific to born sustainable brands in the fashion sector. Systemic barriers include tax and social security burdens, regulatory instability, and limited access to financing, while sector-specific challenges encompass low consumer awareness, the lack of dedicated instruments supporting eco-innovations, and difficulties in scaling operations while maintaining authenticity and value alignment. Distinguishing between these two types of barriers is essential both for advancing theoretical reflection and for designing effective public policies, as it allows issues that require system-wide reforms to be separated from those that call for targeted, sector-specific interventions.

In summary, the findings indicate that sustainable fashion brands operating in Poland seek not only specific instruments of support (such as grants, tax relief, and access to premises), but above all, a coherent, systemic approach that reflects their scale, specific characteristics, and social mission. In comparison to earlier studies—particularly those conducted in other national contexts—it becomes clear that the key difference does not lie in the identity of born sustainable brands, but rather in the institutional conditions under which they operate. These results complement existing literature and may serve as a starting point for further, more comparative regional analyses and for developing public policies better tailored to the needs of this growing segment of enterprises.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to identify the perceived needs and expected support mechanisms among micro, small and medium-sized fashion brands operating in Poland within a born sustainable model. The qualitative research, based on in-depth interviews with sector representatives, revealed that the functioning of such enterprises is rooted not only in the values and commitment of their founders, but also in the availability of external support tools adapted to the specific characteristics of sustainable business models.

Respondents pointed to limited access to funding, a lack of supportive infrastructure, low integration between assistance programmes, and the insufficient incorporation of consumer education as part of the broader ecosystem. These expectations stand in clear contrast to the dominant narrative found in some international analyses, portraying sustainable enterprises as self-reliant entities drawing primarily on internal resources. In the Polish context, the key condition for further development appears to be not only internal cohesion, but also the adequacy and responsiveness of the institutional frameworks in which these businesses operate.

This article contributes to the literature by capturing local conditions and the specific developmental barriers faced by born sustainable brands in Poland. The findings may serve as a basis for further in-depth comparative research and inform the design of public policies that more effectively address the needs of small enterprises working within sustainable models. Of particular importance is the creation of support mechanisms that are coherent, flexible and long-term—mechanisms that not only facilitate the operation of sustainable brands, but also enhance their visibility and impact in advancing the transformation of the fashion sector.

References

Books:

1. Fletcher, K., & Tham, M. (2019). *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan.* The JJF Group.
2. Gardetti, M.A., & Girón, M.E. (Eds.). (2014). *Sustainable Luxury and Social Entrepreneurship: Stories from the Pioneers.* Routledge.

Articles:

One author:

1. Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120. DOI: 10.1177/014920639101700108
2. Clark, H. (2008). SLOW + FASHION—an oxymoron—or a promise for the future…? *Fashion Theory, 12*(4), 427–446 DOI: 10.2752/175174108X346922
3. Fletcher, K. (2010). Slow fashion: An invitation for systems change. *Fashion Practice, 2*(2), 259–265. DOI: 10.2752/175693810X12774625387594
4. Hart, S.L. (1995). A Natural-Resource-Based View of the Firm. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 986–1014.
5. Niinimäki, K. (2010). Eco-clothing, consumer identity and ideology. *Sustainable Development, 18*(3), 150–162. DOI: 10.1002/sd.455
6. Palamutcu, S. (2017). Sustainable textile technologies. In *Textiles and Clothing Sustainability* (pp. 1–22). Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-10-2474-0_1

Two or more authors

7. Bocken, N.M.P., Short, S.W., Rana, P., & Evans, S. (2014). A literature and practice review to develop sustainable business model archetypes. *Journal of Cleaner Production,* 65, 42–56. DOI: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2013.11.039
8. Bos-Brouwers, H.E.J. (2010). Corporate sustainability and innovation in SMEs: Evidence of themes and activities in practice. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 19(7), 417–435. DOI: 10.1002/bse.652
9. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2), 77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
10. Dicuonzo, G., Galeone, G., Ranaldo, S. & Turco, M., 2020. The key drivers of born-sustainable businesses: Evidence from the Italian fashion industry. *Sustainability*, 12(24), art. 10237. DOI: 10.3390/su122410237
11. Fletcher, K. (2010). Slow fashion: An invitation for systems change. *Fashion Practice,* 2(2), 259–265. DOI: 10.2752/175693810X12774625387594
12. Geels, F.W. (2002). Technological transitions as evolutionary reconfiguration processes: a multi-level perspective and a case-study. *Research Policy*, 31(8–9), 1257–1274. DOI: 10.1016/S0048-7333(02)00062-8
13. Geiger, S.M., Fischer, D., & Schrader, U. (2018). Measuring what matters in sustainable consumption: An integrative framework for the selection of relevant behaviors. Sustainable Development, 26(1), 18–33. DOI: 10.1002/sd.1688
14. Henninger, C.E., Alevizou, P.J., & Oates, C.J. (2016). What is sustainable fashion? *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 21(4), 404–416. DOI: 10.1108/JFMM-07-2015-0052
15. Johnstone, M.L., & Tan, L.P. (2015). Exploring the gap between consumers' green rhetoric and purchasing behaviour. *Journal of Business Ethics,* 132(2), 311–328. DOI: 0.1007/s10551-014-2316-3
16. Joy, A., Sherry, J.F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory,* 16(3), 273–296. DOI: 10.2752/175174112X13340749707123

17. Klewitz, J., & Hansen, E.G. (2014). Sustainability-oriented innovation of SMEs: A systematic review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 65, 57–75. DOI: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2013.07.017
18. Kumar, A., Prakash, G. & Kumar, G. (2021). Does environmentally responsible purchase intention matter for consumers? A predictive sustainable model developed through an empirical study. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 58, art. 102270. DOI: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102270
19. McNeill, L., & Moore, R. (2015). Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: Fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies,* 39(3), 212–222. DOI: 10.1111/ijcs.12169
20. Murzyn-Kupisz, M., Szilágyi-Csüllög, M., & Kiss, O.E. (2023). Understanding and implementing sustainability by Polish designers – owners of small, independent fashion brands. *Przedsiębiorczość – Edukacja* [Entrepreneurship – Education], 19(2), 30–46. DOI: 10.24917/20833296.192.2
21. Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(4), 189–200.
22. Niinimäki, K., & Hassi, L. (2011). Emerging design strategies in sustainable production and consumption of textiles and clothing. *Journal of Cleaner Production,* 19(16), 1876–1883. DOI: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2011.04.020
23. Ozdamar Ertekin, Z., Atik, D., & Murray, J.B. (2020). The logic of sustainability: Institutional transformation towards a new culture of fashion. *Journal of Marketing Management, 36*(15–16), 1447–1480. DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2020.1795429
24. Pal, R., & Gander, J. (2018). Modelling environmental value: An examination of sustainable business models within the fashion industry. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 184, 251–263.DOI: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.02.001
25. Park, H., & Lin, L.M. (2020). Exploring attitude–behavior gap in sustainable consumption: Comparison of recycled and upcycled fashion products. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 623–628. DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.08.025
26. Patzelt, H., & Shepherd, D. A. (2011). Recognizing opportunities for sustainable development. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice***,** 35(4), 631–652. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-6520.2010.00386.
27. Smith, A., Stirling, A., & Berkhout, F. (2005). The governance of sustainable socio-technical transitions. *Research Policy*, 34(10), 1491–1510. DOI: 10.1016/j.respol.2005.07.005
28. Trevisan, A.H., Lobo, A., Guzzo, D., Gomes, L.A.V. & Mascarenhas, J., 2023. *Barriers to employing digital technologies for a circular economy: A multi-level perspective*. Journal of Environmental Management, 332, art. 117437. DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvman.2023.117437
29. Utaminingsih, A., Widowati, S.Y. & Witjaksono, E.H., 2024 Sustainable business model innovation: external and internal factors on SMEs. *International Journal of Innovation Science*, 16(1):95–113. DOI: 10.1108/IJIS-04-2022-0061
30. Vecchi, A. & Colucci, M., 2023. The Italian fashion industry and its quest for the green transition. *ZMJ – Zona Moda Journal*, 13(1), pp. 1–23.

Reports and documents:

Polish reports and documents

1. PARP. (2021). *Zrównoważony rozwój i zielona transformacja MŚP w Polsce*. Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości.
2. PARP. (2022). *Raport o stanie sektora małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw w Polsce.* Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości.

International reports and documents

3. Eurostat. (2024). *Labour costs: Share of non-wage costs (%).* Retrieved from https://tradingeconomics.com/poland/labour-costs-share-of-non-wage-costs-percent-eurostat-data
4. Successful Investing in Poland. (2024). *Labour costs in Europe 2024: Poland among the lowest, Germany among the highest.* Retrieved from https://successful-investing-in-poland.com/labour-costs-in-europe-2024-poland-among-the-lowest-germany-among-the-highest
5. TheGlobalEconomy. (2025). *Poland Labour Cost Index.* Retrieved from https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Poland/labor_cost