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# Communicating sustainability to children through fashion retail third places



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# Communicating sustainability to children through fashion retail third places.


## Abstract

**Purpose**: This paper investigates the potential of retail third places to educate children about sustainability and explores how these spaces can enhance sustainability awareness and positively influence children's attitudes.

**Design/methodology/approach**: Research was undertaken through secondary sources and a qualitative research design using focus groups. Thematic coding analysis was conducted.

**Findings**: Children aged 10 to 16 demonstrate a strong awareness of sustainability and express positive attitudes and intentions toward it. However, these intentions rarely translate into sustainable behaviours. While participants showed limited understanding of third places, they responded positively to the concept of educational third places. This paper proposes a theoretical model: 'Children's Sustainability Awareness Stages Enhanced by Educational Third Places.

**Originality**: This paper addresses gaps in the literature on young consumers' attitudes and intentions toward fashion sustainability and third places. It offers preliminary empirical insights into the ideal forms, functions, and features of third places that childrenswear retailers can implement to promote sustainability education within their retail environments.



**Keywords**: Fashion retail, Sustainability awareness, Third places, Education, Children

**Paper type:** research paper




## 1. Introduction

Extensive research has examined consumer attitudes and intentions toward sustainability in general (Lakatos *et al*., 2021; Palakshappa, 2023; Zaman and Kusi-Sarpong, 2023) and within the fashion context (Hosseinpour *et al*., 2016; Mukendi *et al*., 2020; Zhang *et al*., 2021; Tran *et al*., 2022). However, studies focusing on children's perspectives remain scarce (Heo and Muralidharan, 2019; Ritch, 2019; Su *et al*., 2019; Watkins *et al*., 2019). This gap is particularly notable given the global childrenswear market's significant value, estimated at $272.3 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023), and its resilience compared to the broader fashion sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mintel, 2021). The market is expected to expand further, with increasing emphasis on high-quality, environmentally sustainable products (Mintel, 2023). Despite growing consumer interest in brands with sustainable practices (Euromonitor, 2022), little is known about children's attitudes toward fashion sustainability.

This paper addresses this gap by assessing children's sustainability awareness using McNeill and Moore's (2015) Sustainability Attitudes Stages model. It underscores the urgency of educating consumers on sustainability to facilitate meaningful transformation in the fashion industry (Fletcher and Tham, 2016). The study further investigates which educational experiences fashion retailers should adopt to promote sustainability (Prothero *et al*., 2011; Marín-García A. *et al*., 2021). Recognizing childhood as a critical period for shaping attitudes

(Davis and Elliot, 2009), the paper proposes using third places as a means to communicate sustainability concepts effectively. Specifically, it explores the forms, functions, and features of third places based on Alexander's (2019) Third Places Dimensions Model and examines children's perceptions of these spaces as potential sustainability communicators.

To achieve these goals, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on fashion sustainability, early sustainability education, and retail third places. Section 3 outlines the research design. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings, while Section 5 provides recommendations for fashion retailers, highlights theoretical contributions, and concludes with study limitations and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Sustainability Awareness

The fashion industry plays a critical role in the global economy, contributing €1.5 trillion in annual revenues and employing approximately 75 million people globally (Euromonitor, 2022). However, its economic impact comes with significant social and environmental costs, including resource overexploitation and labour inequities (Global Fashion Agenda and The Boston Consulting Group, 2017). While sustainability in fashion has been widely studied (Gupta *et al*., 2019; Bellucci *et al.,* 2020; Alam *et al*., 2024), research on children as sustainable consumers remains limited (Donovan, 2016; Heo and Muralidharan, 2019; Su *et al*., 2019; Watkins *et al*., 2019).

A key challenge in sustainability is the "ethical purchasing gap," where positive attitudes fail to translate into behaviours (El Haffar *et al*., 2020; Dhir *et al*., 2021; Blas *et al*., 2023; Sharma, 2023). This gap is pronounced in fashion due to complexities and inconsistencies in the definitions of sustainable fashion (Reimers *et al*., 2016; Ibrahim and Al-Ajlouni, 2018; Brandão *et al*., 2021). Improving consumer knowledge is essential to influencing behaviour (Calza *et al*., 2023), but progress is hindered by a lack of accessible, accurate information (Hwang *et al*., 2015; Rothenberg and Mathews, 2017). Educational initiatives targeting children can play a transformative role in bridging this gap and fostering lifelong sustainable habits (Beard, 2008; Finisterra do Paço and Raposo, 2010; Tahalele, 2020).

Educational systems have the potential to create a strong link between environmental awareness and the fashion industry's impact (Prothero *et al*., 2011; Fletcher *et al*., 2012). This requires collaboration among educators, policymakers, and retailers to develop comprehensive programs addressing sustainability challenges (Armstrong and LeHew, 2014; Arlesa and Sanjukta, 2022). Effective communication and education are vital to fostering sustainability attitudes in young consumers (Fletcher and Tham, 2016; Lee., 2023), a gap this research aims to fill.

Foundational theories provide insight into attitudes and behaviours. Katz (1960) identifies attitudes as affective and cognitive constructs influencing decisions. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour highlights perceived behavioural control in shaping intentions, while Schwartz's (1994) values theory underscores motivators like hedonism and self-direction on consumer actions. However, external factors such as sociocultural dynamics and economic constraints also shape the attitude-behaviour gap (Blake, 1999). In sustainable fashion, physical product attributes often outweigh intrinsic motivators (Magnuson *et al*., 2017). Building on

these theoretical frameworks, this study integrates McNeill and Moore's (2015) Sustainability Attitudes Stages Model with Alexander's (2019) Third-Place Dimensions Model to analyse children's sustainability awareness. By incorporating experiential learning in third places, this research explores how interactive retail environments can empower young consumers to overcome barriers to sustainable consumption and act as agents of change.

### 2.2. Children and Education

Education is widely recognized as a transformative tool for advancing sustainability, applicable across formal and non-formal contexts (Huckle and Wals, 2015; Nousheen *et al*., 2020). Early childhood is especially critical for instilling values and behaviours, forming the foundation for lifelong environmental awareness (Davis and Elliot, 2009). Embedding sustainability principles during these formative years can create lasting individual and collective impacts (OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2008).

Arbuthnott (2009) highlights the weak link between intent and action, emphasizing the need for educational strategies that actively shape behaviour rather than merely raising awareness. Generations Alpha and Z demonstrate stronger environmental commitments than Millennials, favouring sustainable products and practices (Lavuri *et al*., 2021). While sustainability education has focused on higher education (Boca and Saraçlı, 2019; Al-Rahmi *et al*., 2021; Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021), there is increasing recognition of the need to address these issues earlier.

The United Nations (UN) underscores the urgency of integrating sustainability into education. As Buckler and Creech (2014, p.3) state, "Education can – and must – play a decisive role in providing learners across the world with the knowledge, skills and values to discover solutions to today's sustainability challenges". To this end, UNESCO's Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), launched in 2014, promotes collaboration among educators, policymakers, and communities to embed sustainability into curricula and evaluation metrics (Oe *et al*., 2022). Similarly, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines sustainable consumption education as teaching the knowledge, values, and skills needed for environmentally responsible behaviours (Thoresen, 2010). Localized efforts, such as the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics, mandate teaching children their shared global responsibility to the environment and humanity (Code 1.4). These initiatives highlight how industries like fashion can contribute to sustainability if such educational strategies are widely adopted (Fletcher *et al*., 2012).

Retailers have a unique opportunity to implement these educational approaches into physical spaces by creating initiatives that connect learning with the shopping experience. Through interactive activations like workshops or gamified activities, knowledge about sustainability can be translated into practical behaviours. These initiatives not only enhance awareness among young consumers but also position retailers as key players in promoting sustainable practices.

### 2.3. Fashion Retail Third Places

Retail environments are critical platforms for communicating sustainability to young consumers (Ochoa, 2011; Davies and Gutsche, 2016). Generations Alpha and younger Gen Z

(ages 10–16) show strong environmental commitments (Lavuri *et al*., 2021), yet limited understanding of sustainability concepts and scepticism toward green marketing claims hinder effective communication (Harris *et al*., 2016; Wilber and Pasricha, 2017). Retailers must balance sustainability messaging with consumer expectations for affordability, quality, and convenience.

The concept of third places, introduced by Oldenburg (1999), describes social spaces distinct from home (first place) and work (second place) where individuals gather, interact, and build community. These spaces now include commercial, experiential, and hybrid typologies (Crick, 2011). While third places have been studied extensively (Crick, 2011; Laing and Royle, 2013), including in fashion contexts (Manlow and Nobbs, 2013; Nobbs, 2014; Alexander, 2019), their application in children's retail environments remains underexplored. Alexander's (2019) Dimensions of Third Places, such as entertainment, social interaction, education, and aesthetics—highlight their potential for delivering engaging and educational consumer experiences, aligning with this study's focus. These dimensions offer a framework for assessing the suitability of third places as conduits for sustainability education.

Physical retail third places provide unique opportunities for experiential learning (Kent, 2007; Mick *et al*., 2011). Interactive and tangible activities in these spaces can simplify complex sustainability concepts, enhancing children's understanding of environmental issues (Mikunda, 2007; Buckler and Creech, 2014). Educational programs delivered in such settings build trust, credibility, equip children with critical evaluation skills, and bridge the gap between awareness and action (Fletcher and Tham, 2016). Moreover, Alexander's (2019) Third Place Dimensions Model emphasizes the importance of education in designing third places to engage young consumers. Third places can integrate sustainability themes through immersive storytelling, tactile displays, and collaborative activities to deepen engagement. For example, interactive stations could illustrate a product's lifecycle, from raw materials to disposal, helping children understand consumption's environmental impact. These initiatives educate and empower young consumers to make informed choices and foster sustainable behaviours.

Research supports the value of retail third places in fostering sustainable behaviours among children. Ayadi and Cao (2016) show that engaging store atmospherics encourage exploration and revisitation, while Feenstra *et al*. (2015) highlight the educational potential of in-store workshops and activities. This paper extends these insights by proposing actionable frameworks for integrating third places into children's retail settings. Emerging technologies like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) can further enhance these experiences, making sustainability concepts more accessible and engaging. By expanding third places to include participatory and educational dimensions, retailers can deepen connections with young consumers and transform these spaces into powerful sustainability education tools. Aligning commercial and educational objectives benefits both consumers and broader societal efforts to promote sustainability

### 2.4. Theoretical Framework

McNeill and Moore's (2015) *Sustainability Attitudes Stages Framework* classifies consumer awareness into five stages: incorporative (no awareness), impulsive (potential for awareness), imperial (requires concrete examples), interpersonal (capable of understanding abstract concepts), and institutional (able to process complex issues). This study positions retail third

places as catalysts for advancing children through these stages by leveraging interactive and educational experiences to enhance sustainability awareness.

The proposed theoretical framework integrates Alexander's (2019) dimensions of third places with McNeill and Moore's stages, offering a comprehensive model for fostering sustainable behaviours in young consumers. By incorporating features such as hands-on learning, visual storytelling, and interactive technologies, third places can address the unique needs of each developmental stage. Figure 1 illustrates the integration of these concepts within the *Sustainability Attitudes Stages Framework*.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

This research addresses the following questions:

- **RQ1:** How aware are children of sustainability and fashion sustainability?
- **RQ2:** How suitable are retail third places for educating children about sustainability?
- **RQ3:** How can third places in retail settings improve children's sustainability awareness?

By exploring these questions, this study contributes to research on children as sustainable consumers, the educational potential of third places, and effective sustainability communication strategies in the fashion industry. The findings aim to offer theoretical insights and practical recommendations for integrating third places into retail environments, advancing sustainability-oriented behaviours among younger generations. By synthesizing third place, sustainable awareness and educational theoretical concepts, this study delivers a holistic framework for meaningful change.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist, exploratory, qualitative approach to examine the role of children as "social actors" (Silverman, 1993). It aims to achieve two objectives: (1) explore children's awareness and perceptions of sustainability and third places, and (2) evaluate the suitability of retail third places for sustainability communication, with a focus on social interaction. A qualitative research design (Denzin and Lincoln, 2006) was chosen for its ability to uncover nuanced findings and contribute to theory building (Alam, 2005).

Focus groups were employed as the primary data collection method, providing rich, descriptive insights into children's perspectives on sustainability and third places. This method is particularly effective for engaging young participants, who may be less expressive in individual interviews (Neumark-Sztainer *et al*., 1999). Focus groups foster open dialogue in an interactive setting, encouraging the articulation of ideas that might otherwise remain unspoken (Silverman, 1993). The discussion protocol, guided by the study's theoretical framework and research questions (RQ1–RQ3), explored children's awareness of fashion sustainability, the role of retail third places in education, and ways to enhance sustainability communication through these spaces.

Projective techniques (Will *et al*., 1996; Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000) were used to enhance participant engagement, with photo elicitation serving as a key tool. Visual aids, including images and videos of the fashion value chain, its environmental and social practices, and

examples of third places, were introduced to make abstract concepts tangible. Examples included child-focused spaces like Mombini, which combines a café with play areas, and venues such as The Science Museum and Hamleys, which emphasize free play and experimentation. Images of sports fashion stores, such as Adidas and Nike, illustrated the use of interactive and technological features, while Apple stores highlighted high visitor interaction, extended time spent in the space, and opportunities for educational activities. These materials facilitated deeper discussions and reflections among participants.

Children aged 10 to 16 years were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, engaging primary and secondary schools in Madrid and leveraging personal networks to access families. This recruitment approach follows established ethical protocols for involving minors in qualitative research (Hackett, 2016), and in adherence with MRS Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People (2014), with informed consent obtained from both children and their guardians. Four focus groups were conducted with 19 participants, organized into age-homogeneous groups of four to six individuals to encourage honest discussions (Robinson, 1999). Focus groups were held in private homes to create a comfortable and familiar environment for participants. Measures were implemented to ensure privacy, security, and a supportive atmosphere, minimizing any potential harm or discomfort (Cooper and Schindler, 2008).

The research adhered to established ethical guidelines, including the distribution of participant information sheets, obtaining informed consent from both parents and participants, preserving confidentiality and anonymity, and securely destroying recordings post-analysis.

### 3.1. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis, providing a structured approach to identifying patterns, experiences, and meanings (Robson, 2011). This analysis occurred in three phases. First, focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed (Silverman, 1993). Next, initial coding was performed, with each code capturing specific information or insights from sentences or paragraphs (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finally, codes were organized into sub-themes and refined into broader themes that aligned with the research questions and emergent insights. To add rigor to the data analysis process, AI- driven Atlas.ti for systematic coding and retrieval of data (Friese, 2019) was used to complement the manual analysis. Atlas.ti facilitated pattern recognition and ensured consistency in data categorization, while also enabling co-occurrence mapping to examine relationships between themes. This was cross-checked against the manual thematic analysis processes, and congruency of codes-categories-themes verified. Given the exploratory nature of this research, advanced computational methods such as sentiment analysis or network mapping were not prioritized, as the study aimed to capture rich, contextually grounded insights rather than algorithmic pattern detection.

The identified themes connect directly to the research questions. Specifically, the themes of sustainability awareness and children's attitudes toward sustainability address the first research question by exploring how children perceive and understand sustainability in fashion. Meanwhile, the sub-themes leading to the broader themes of Retail Third Places and Educating Children in Sustainability were developed to address the second and third research questions. These themes illustrate how educational initiatives and third-place features in retail environments can enhance sustainability awareness. Importantly, the second and third research questions draw on insights from the first set of themes, highlighting their interconnectedness.

To systematically represent these connections, a thematic coding matrix (Table 1) was created to map findings across 15 key codes derived from the data. This matrix provided a comprehensive overview of participants' priorities and perceptions while visually demonstrating the alignment between sub-themes, themes, and research questions. By quantifying the frequency with which participants mentioned sub-themes, the matrix highlighted their prominence, offering a nuanced understanding of their relevance to the study's objectives. The codes encompassed topics such as sustainability awareness, attitudes toward third places, specific retail functions, features, and educational opportunities, ensuring comprehensive representation of thematic insights. Analytical visualization tools, including quotes and word clouds, complemented the matrix by synthesizing data and emphasizing key patterns. These tools enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings by clearly illustrating connections between participant insights, thematic categories, and the study's guiding research questions.

To ensure trustworthiness and authenticity, the study adhered to established criteria for qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The priori framework informed the protocol design and ensured consistent application across focus groups, aligning with the research questions. Validation was achieved through iterative questioning and participant feedback, resulting in robust and credible findings. Detailed documentation, including a protocol manual, coding schema, and data records, was maintained to enhance transparency and reproducibility (Golafshani, 2003). In addition, a reflexivity statement was included to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and potential biases, thereby strengthening the study's trustworthiness. Reflexivity in qualitative research ensures transparency in interpretation, particularly when investigating sensitive topics such as children's perceptions (Finlay, 2002). Throughout the research process, self-reflective memos were regularly maintained to document preconceptions, methodological choices, and emerging insights, ensuring a rigorous and transparent analytical approach (Berger, 2015).
<Insert Table 1 here>

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Sustainability Awareness

This section addresses RQ1: *How aware are children about sustainability and specifically fashion sustainability?* It focuses on analyzing children's awareness levels and their theoretical alignment. Children's awareness of sustainability varied significantly, revealing both strengths and gaps in their understanding. Participants associated sustainability with diverse themes, including environmental care, recycling, and personal comfort (Figure 2). These associations concur with prior research suggesting that confusion around sustainability affects consumer attitudes and actions (Henninger *et al*., 2016; Reimers *et al*., 2016; Brandão *et al*., 2021). Similarly, children's interpretations of sustainability reflected fragmented knowledge influenced by their limited exposure to education on the subject.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

The findings revealed nuanced perspectives on children's perceptions of unsustainable practices within the fashion value chain, including fabric waste, water pollution, transport emissions, and poor labour conditions. They also noted issues like packaging waste and store electricity inefficiencies, highlighting a growing understanding of both environmental and social impacts. While many recognized the environmental and social impacts of the fashion

industry, their understanding often required contextual examples to connect abstract concepts with tangible outcomes. For instance, a participant remarked: "I didn't know that making clothes could harm people and the planet" (P2 – FG3). This underscores the importance of educational interventions that translate complex ideas into relatable narratives, echoing Prothero *et al*.'s (2011) and Fletcher *et al*.'s (2012) findings.

Using McNeill and Moore's (2015) framework, participants' awareness was mapped across stages, revealing a progression from basic to more integrated understandings. Younger participants exhibited stage-three awareness, articulating an understanding of environmental cause-effect relationships: "Don't throw rubbish because it can harm the animals and the water" (P1 – FG2). Older participants provided more systemic reflections, such as: "Pollution in one country spreads everywhere, affecting the entire planet" (P4 – FG3). While children demonstrated an ability to grasp interconnected concepts, gaps persisted in their comprehension of industry-specific impacts, necessitating targeted educational strategies (Tahalele, 2020; Arlesa and Sanjukta, 2022).

### 4.2. Attitudes Toward Sustainability

This section also addresses *RQ1: How aware are children about sustainability and specifically fashion sustainability?* While still exploring awareness levels, it delves deeper into children's attitudes toward sustainability and their perspectives on sustainable practices within the fashion industry. Children's attitudes towards sustainability revealed a mix of optimism, skepticism, and practical constraints. Participants demonstrated general awareness of sustainability issues, with younger children (10-12 years old) focusing on immediate and tangible actions, such as recycling or reducing waste. Older participants (13-16 years), on the other hand, exhibited a deeper understanding of global environmental systems and interconnectivity. For example, one participant noted: "For example, in Asia, they make a lot of stuff. And things can be shipped from different countries and people can share the stuff that they have. So, if one country pollutes a lot, it does not only affect that country but the whole world" (P2 – FG3). These insights align with stage-three awareness in McNeill and Moore's framework, where individuals recognize the interconnectedness of environmental systems (Fletcher and Tham, 2016) but have not yet fully embraced cooperative and systemic approaches.

Despite these positive attitudes, children's actions reflected the ethical attitude-behaviour gap observed in adult studies (Hosseinpour *et al*., 2016; El Haffar *et al*., 2020). While participants expressed a sense of intergenerational responsibility, as evidenced by comments like "Take care of your world because you are going to destroy it" (P1 – FG2), their sustainable behaviours were limited to simple practices, such as donating or passing down old clothes: "We give our old clothes to others who can use them" (P1 – FG2). More innovative approaches, such as upcycling or repurposing garments, were rare, illustrating a lack of actionable knowledge and creativity in promoting sustainable practices.

Skepticism emerged as a significant barrier, particularly regarding the authenticity of sustainability claims by fashion brands. For instance, one participant stated: "Zara claims to prioritize the environment, but I think it's a lie. They don't actually care about sustainability; they only market it for appearances" (FG4 - P3). This aligns with stage three's emphasis on critically examining external influences and motivations but also mirrors challenges seen in adult behaviour. Price sensitivity further exacerbated these barriers, with participants emphasizing affordability over sustainability: "I wouldn't pay more for sustainable clothing unless the price difference is very small" (FG4 - P2).

While skepticism about large retailer practices was prevalent, participants expressed admiration for specific brands they perceived as genuinely sustainable, such as Ecoalf, Veja, and Patagonia. These brands were acknowledged for their efforts to innovate and reduce environmental impact. However, this admiration contrasted with their actual purchasing behaviour, which favoured mainstream retailers like Zara, Primark, and H&M for their affordability and convenience. This disconnect underscores the ethical attitude-behaviour gap and highlights the structural barriers to fostering meaningful change in sustainable purchasing patterns among young consumers.

Findings suggest that children's sustainable attitudes largely align with stage three of McNeill and Moore's framework, recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental systems and the broader impacts of individual actions. However, few participants showed signs of progression toward stage four, which involves cooperative responsibility and systemic thinking. Statements like "We need to work together [...] It is a big chain where we all are connected, and we need to work with each other" (P1 – FG2) reflect a readiness to embrace collective action. Furthermore, younger children appeared more open to proposing practical solutions, suggesting varying levels of engagement across age groups.

To reflect these nuanced findings, a revised stage three of the framework is proposed (Figure 3). This revision incorporates children's reliance on concrete examples to understand sustainability while also acknowledging their emerging role as social agents of change. The revised stage emphasizes the importance of intergenerational responsibility and highlights the need for targeted educational interventions to bridge the gap between awareness and actionable behaviour.

### 4.3. Sustainable Education Potential of Retail Third Places

This section addresses RQ2 (*How suitable are retail third places for educating children about sustainability?*), while also contributing insights to RQ3. The focus is on evaluating whether third places in retail environments, as framed by Alexander's (2019) model, offer the necessary features to engage children in sustainability education. The concept of third places, rooted in Oldenburg's (1999) work on social environments, has since been extended into consumer contexts (Crick, 2011; Alexander, 2019). However, their educational potential, particularly for sustainability, remains underexplored.

Children's understanding of retail third places varied significantly. Most participants associated these spaces with examples they had encountered, such as IKEA's ball pit or Primark's in-store café, reflecting a limited view of third places as environments for socialization or education. This limited perception aligns with Mick *et al*. (2011) and Henninger *et al*. (2016), who highlight consumers' difficulty in recognizing non-traditional educational opportunities. Exposure to visual stimuli showcasing diverse retail third place designs (e.g. Mombini's crafting areas, Hamleys' interactive play zones, and Adidas' customization zones), revealed varying levels of engagement. Younger participants were enthusiastic about immersive and playful environments, as evidenced: "I really like this one with the crafting area. I would take my little sister to that place, and I would even have fun with her" (P6 – FG1). Conversely, older participants expressed skepticism regarding their practicality, with one participant noting: "If I go to a store, I go to a store. And if I go to a coffee shop, I go to a coffee shop" (P1 – FG3).

The study also explored specific third place functions and features identified by Alexander (2019), such as entertainment, social interaction, and educational opportunities. Interactive

features, like Adidas' try-yourself areas and Apple's "Today at Apple" workshops, were particularly well-received. These examples resonate with Beard (2008) and Fletcher *et al*.'s (2012) emphasis on experiential learning as a tool to engage and educate. One participant described: "Apple's workshops are very engaging and leave a positive impression of the brand" (P3 – FG3). Similarly, Nike's shoe interactive screens encouraged exploration and informed decision-making: "Interactive displays, like the shoe comparison screen in Nike stores, are interesting and align with younger customers' curiosity" (P4 – FG4). These observations reinforce the idea that hands-on features foster curiosity and active participation (Armstrong and LeHew, 2014; Nousheen *et al*., 2020).

Passive features, while less dynamic, also shaped participants' perceptions of third places. Zara's self-checkouts were praised for their convenience: "I've used self-service checkouts at Zara; it's much faster and more convenient, especially when there are long queues" (P3 – FG3). While passive, these features contribute to the overall attractiveness of retail spaces by simplifying the shopping process, aligning with consumer behaviour literature that underscores the value of convenience (Dhir *et al*., 2021).

However, the interplay between passive and interactive elements highlights the complexity of designing third places. Many features borrowed from retail environments appealed to children, but their suitability for sustainability education remains uncertain. Participants valued the entertaining and social aspects of these spaces, yet skepticism persisted about their necessity or effectiveness for educational purposes. Some participants questioned the integration of cafés or other non-retail functions: "A brand is not attractive enough that they have to put a coffee shop inside the store?" (P1 – FG3). This reflects Crick's (2011) notion of consumer ambivalence towards hybrid retail spaces that merge commercial and experiential elements.

While retail third places demonstrate potential as engaging spaces, their educational suitability requires thoughtful integration of features. Borrowing elements from existing retail environments, such as technology-driven workshops or interactive play areas, could enhance third places' appeal. However, definitive claims about their effectiveness for educating children about sustainability require further empirical validation. By bridging insights from Alexander's (2019) dimensions and educational theories (Beard, 2008; Fletcher *et al*., 2012), this analysis provides a foundation for reimagining third places as conduits for sustainability education.

### 4.4. Improving children's sustainability awareness through retail third places

This section focuses on RQ3 (How can sustainability awareness be improved through third places in children's retail settings?), while also providing insights for RQ2. It explores practical strategies to design third places that effectively enhance children's sustainability awareness through interactive and immersive experiences.

The potential of third places as educational environments hinge on their ability to meaningfully engage children while delivering sustainability messages. Participants responded positively to workshops integrating education with interactive experiences. For instance, Apple's "Today at Apple" workshops resonated with one participant who noted: "I learned how to take better photos and had a lot of fun" (P3 – FG2). These findings align with the literature emphasizing the efficacy of experiential learning (Beard, 2008; Fletcher *et al*., 2012).

However, not all participants viewed education as a priority in retail spaces. Some expressed resistance to overtly formal approaches: "Stores are for shopping, not for school stuff" (P4 – FG3). This sentiment suggests that educational features must seamlessly integrate with entertainment and functionality to avoid evoking a classroom-like atmosphere. Successful initiatives should prioritize engagement through creative storytelling and interactive tools (Nousheen *et al*., 2020; Mick *et al*., 2011).

Authenticity emerged as a critical factor influencing the success of educational third places. Participants expressed doubts about brands' sustainability claims, with one participant stating: "They only care about selling more stuff, not the environment" (P2 – FG4). To overcome such scepticism, retailers must demonstrate transparency and credibility in their messaging, fostering trust among young consumers (Henninger *et al*., 2016; Fletcher and Tham, 2016).

Furthermore, the integration of third places into sustainability education must account for children's developmental stages. Borrowing from McNeill and Moore's framework, interactive and engaging features could be designed to advance children through the stages of sustainability awareness, emphasizing hands-on learning and real-world applications. By addressing the interplay between trust, engagement, and developmental needs, third places could serve as effective conduits for fostering sustainability awareness.

Third places hold promise as environments for sustainability education. Their success depends on blending education with engagement, ensuring authenticity, and addressing the scepticism surrounding corporate sustainability efforts. With careful design and integration, third places could bridge the gap between awareness and action, contributing to long-term behavioural change.

### 4.5 Revised Theoretical Framework

The revised theoretical framework integrates findings from the study to address the research questions comprehensively:

- *RQ1: Current Awareness of Sustainability*. Children demonstrated basic awareness of sustainability concepts, but gaps remain in their understanding of systemic impacts, highlighting the need for targeted educational interventions.
- *RQ2: Suitability of Retail Third Places*. Third places in retail environments exhibit potential as engaging spaces for sustainability education. However, their suitability relies on thoughtful integration of interactive and passive features, informed by Alexander's (2019) framework. While initial findings suggest promise, further empirical validation is necessary to confirm their effectiveness as educational environments.
- *RQ3: Enhancing Awareness Through Third Places*. Strategies such as transparent communication, interactive workshops, and creative storytelling emerged as key to improving sustainability education in retail settings.

<Insert Figure 3 here>

This framework provides a roadmap for leveraging retail third places to foster sustainability awareness among young consumers, balancing education, engagement, and practicality to meet their needs effectively.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances research on sustainability attitudes by focusing on children's perspectives (Ritch, 2019; Donovan, 2016; Su et al., 2019). By adapting McNeill and Moore's (2015) Sustainability Attitudes Stages Model to account for children's developmental needs and incorporating Alexander's (2019) Third-Place framework, the research illustrates how features like services and interactive engagement influence sustainability preferences. The findings indicate that children's awareness corresponds to stage three of the model, demonstrating an understanding of interconnected systems. However, developmental differences emerge, with younger children favouring tangible actions and older participants exhibiting more socially responsible views.

This study also addresses the attitude-behaviour gap identified in adult consumer research (Blake, 1999; El Haffar et al., 2020; Brandão et al., 2021; Dhir et al., 2021; Blas et al., 2023; Sharma, 2023), which reveals a disconnect between attitudes and actions due to external constraints such as cost and scepticism (Ajzen, 1991). Among children, scepticism towards brand claims and price sensitivity reflect adult patterns, limiting sustainable behaviours despite positive attitudes.

Finally, this research contributes to the literature on third places (Manlow and Nobbs, 2013; Nobbs, 2014; Alexander, 2019), emphasizing their potential to bridge the attitude-behaviour gap. Thoughtfully designed third places can enhance sustainability awareness by integrating interactive and educational features, transforming awareness into action through engaging and memorable experiences.

### 5.2. Practical Contributions

Retail third places present an opportunity to promote sustainability awareness among young consumers. This study emphasizes that specific features aligned with Alexander's (2019) model—such as try-before-buy, extra services, and enhancements to the overall consumption experience—are particularly appealing to children. Preferences for these features differ by age: younger participants prefer interactive and playful elements, while older children lean towards passive features that offer convenience and efficiency. Retailers should design their spaces to accommodate these age-related differences.

A key insight from the findings is the importance of transparency in building trust. Children prefer clear and credible sustainability messaging. Retailers can foster trust by integrating honest communication into their third places—such as explaining the sustainable practices behind their products or showcasing tangible environmental benefits. Simple, interactive educational displays or workshops can effectively bridge the gap between awareness and action without overwhelming children with overly formal or didactic approaches.

Features that extend dwell time and encourage experiential learning, like Adidas' customization areas or Apple's workshops, offer promising avenues for engaging children in sustainability education. However, retailers must carefully balance entertainment and education, ensuring sustainability messages are seamlessly integrated into the experience to avoid creating a classroom-like atmosphere, which many participants resisted.

While the findings are exploratory and based on separate visual examples of sustainability and third places used to provoke dialogue in focus groups, the results indicate that thoughtfully designed third places could enhance sustainability education. Retailers should conduct further studies and pilot tailored features—such as gamified sustainability challenges or hybrid passive-interactive displays—to assess their effectiveness. This iterative approach can help refine strategies for meaningfully engaging children and fostering lasting sustainable behaviours.

Ultimately, aligning third-place features with transparency, age-specific preferences, and interactive engagement positions retail spaces as potential catalysts for sustainability education. However, retailers should treat these initiatives as experimental and exploratory, requiring further validation through focused empirical research.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Research

While an exploratory qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, it has limitations. Children's awareness was based on their own knowledge, which may have been influenced by other participants' opinions—the "follow the leader" effect (Morgan, 1988)—potentially skewing the results. Additionally, the study is limited by age, geography, sector, and scale. Future research could expand on this by using a larger sample size and exploring different countries. Given that many retailers operate internationally, examining similarities or differences between markets would be valuable, especially since retailers and customers are at different stages of sustainability adoption and awareness.

Furthermore, participants in this study lacked direct experience with retail third places and only knew them through images. Future research could incorporate participant observation to assess children's interactions with retail third places in situ. This limitation highlights an interesting finding: despite not having direct experience, children were able to identify elements and features of third places and express attitudes toward them. This suggests that these features warrant further examination, potentially through experimental designs. A quantitative approach to test the effectiveness of the proposed theoretical framework with a larger sample of children would help quantify their sustainability awareness. Additionally, further exploration of the attitude-behaviour gap in children is needed to identify ways to close it.

As customer experience becomes a strategic priority for retailers, and third places are recognized as enhancing experiential value, there is significant potential for research into how third places can facilitate sustainable educational experiences in both offline and online retail environments. Specifically, investigating how innovative physical third places can attract customers in-store, alongside exploring the opportunities presented by digital third places, is essential as younger generations increasingly spend their leisure time in digital spaces. Collectively, research focused on the potential of third places to foster positive sustainability awareness, attitudes, and behaviours in children deserves further attention.

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Figure 1: Theoretical framework - Sustainability attitudes stages informed by third places aimed at children (Source: Adapted from McNeill and Moore, 2015; Alexander, 2019)

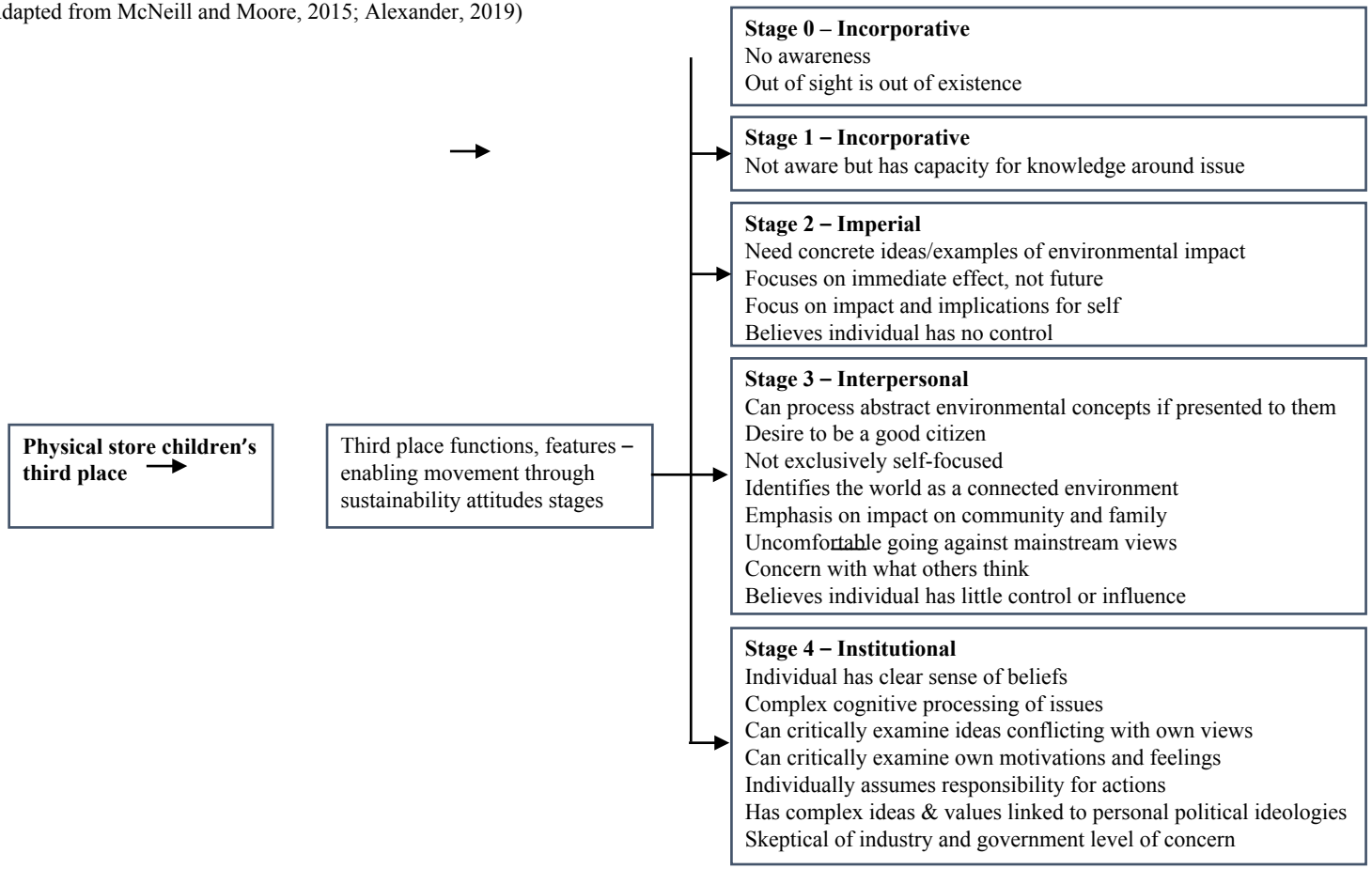

Figure 2: Word cloud of children's definitional perception of sustainability generated by Atlas.ti (Source: Author's own work).

Figure 3: Revised theoretical framework: Children's sustainability attitudes stages infused by educational third places (Source: Author's own work).

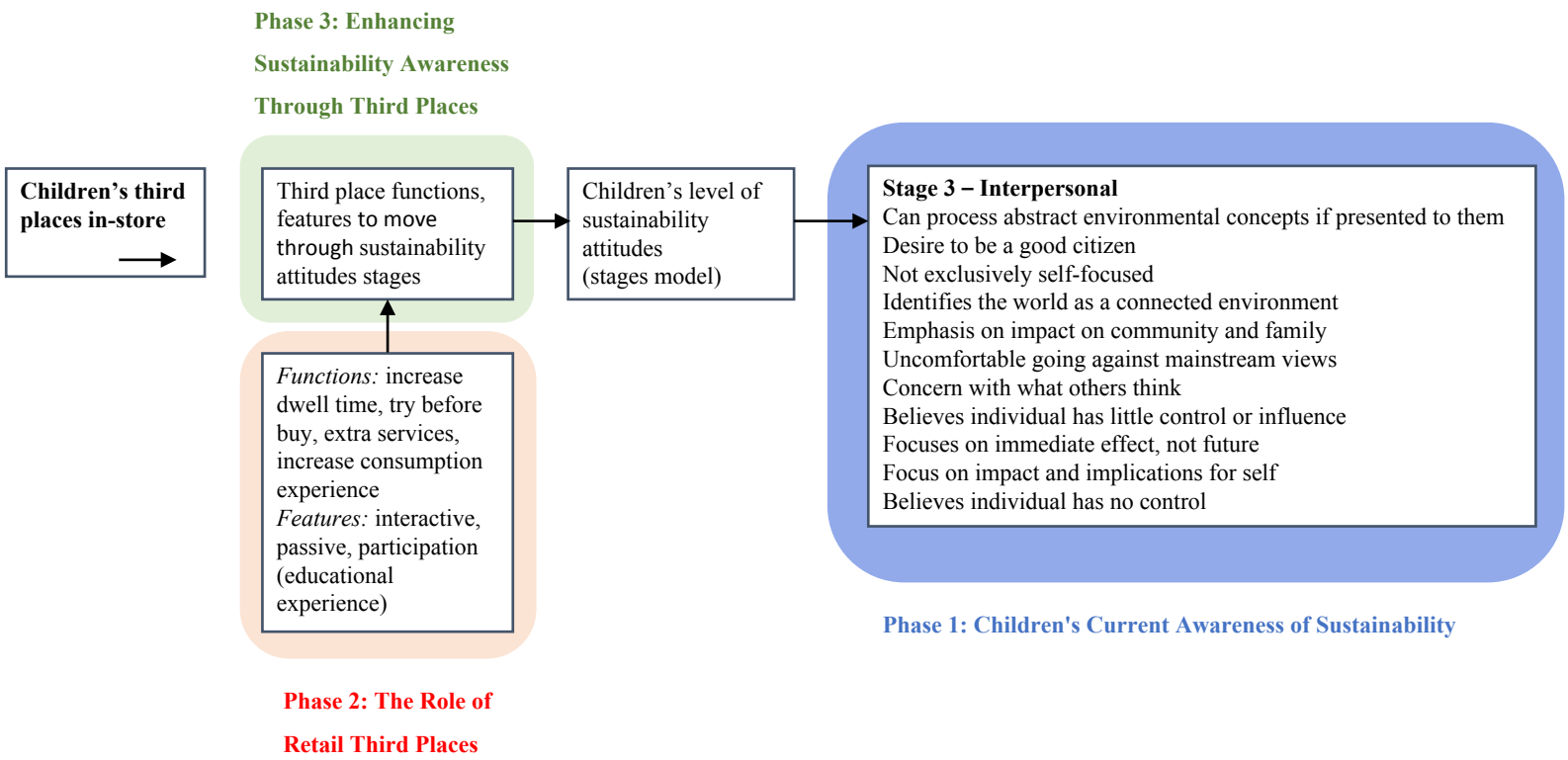

Table 1: Thematic Coding Matrix: Key Themes and Citations from Focus Group Analysis (Author's own work).

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Code | Number of citations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainability Awareness | Perception of Sustainability | SUS-PER | 22 |
| Sustainability Awareness | Problems in the Value Chain | IND-PROB | 20 |
| Sustainability Awareness | Understanding the Full Cycle | IND-CYC | 16 |
| Children's Attitudes Towards Sustainability | Concrete Actions | SUS-ACT | 18 |
| Children's Attitudes Towards Sustainability | Scepticism and Barriers | SUS-SKE | 14 |
| Children's Attitudes Towards Sustainability | Improvement Proposals | IND-IMP | 12 |
| Retail Third Places | Attitudes towards In-store experiences | STR-ATT | 25 |
| Retail Third Places | In-store experiences (Extra services, try-before-buy, technology) | STR-EXT | 22 |
| Retail Third Places | Interactive features (attraction for young consumers through interactivity and curiosity) | IND-CYC | 16 |
| Education on sustainability | Interest in workshops and educational activities | EDU-INT | 13 |
| Education on sustainability | Sustainable Messaging | EDU-MSG | 13 |
| Education on sustainability | Perceived Practical Impact | EDU-IMP | 9 |