

Assignment 2

How Does Social Media Influence Gen Z's Perception of Sustainable Fashion and Their Aligned Purchasing Decisions?

Written By:

Alexandra Coleman
Khushbo Khemlani
Mahdiya Ahmed

Teacher: Apsara Sabaratnam

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the value action gap between Gen Z consumers' stated support for sustainable fashion and their actual purchasing behaviour. Despite increasing awareness of environmental and ethical concerns in the fashion industry, many Gen Z consumers struggle to align their values with their fashion choices. Through qualitative research with three Gen Z consumers from diverse backgrounds, the study identifies key motivations, barriers, and external influences that shape their consumption habits.

The findings reveal that social media plays a pivotal role in raising awareness, promoting sustainable brands, and inspiring action. Influencers, peers, and platforms like Instagram and Youtube were frequently cited as trusted sources of information. Participants shared strong ethical motivations, including concerns about labour conditions and environmental harm. However, financial constraints and skepticism about greenwashing often affect their ability to make sustainable purchases.

Although all interviews actively sought out ethical brands like Patagonia, Tentree, and Reformation, affordability remained a consistent barrier. The influence of peers and family, especially those educated in sustainability, was also significant. Ultimately, the study highlights that Gen Z is highly engaged, informed, and ethically driven—but practical challenges hinder consistent sustainable consumption. These insights offer valuable guidance for brands, educators, and policymakers aiming to bridge the value action gap and foster meaningful change.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to analyze and explore the inconsistencies between Gen Z consumers' claimed support for sustainable fashion and their actual purchasing behaviors. This is often referred to as the value/action gap. Despite the growing awareness of environmental and ethical issues within the fashion industry, ongoing research suggests that while Gen Z expresses their intentions to shop sustainably, their actions don't necessarily align with these values. This report will focus specifically on Gen Z consumers (aged within 18-29) in the fashion retail context. Examining three core areas, the motivations behind Gen Z's sustainable fashion values, the barriers that contribute to the value/action gap and the influence of external factors. With interviews of sustainable Gen Z consumers, this research aims to offer insights for brands, educators and policymakers seeking to better engage Gen Z in sustainable consumption.

Key Term Definitions

1. Value-Action Gap:
The difference between individuals' stated ethical or environmental values and their actual behavior (Carrington et al., 2010).
2. Target Demographics:
A defined segment of the population that a business or campaign aims to serve, based on factors such as age, income, or interests (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

3. Greenwashing:
A deceptive marketing strategy where companies falsely portray their products or policies as environmentally responsible (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).
4. Eco-Friendly:
Refers to products or practices that cause little or no harm to the environment (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.).
5. Sustainability:
The principle of meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (WCED, 1987).
6. Primary/Secondary Source:
A primary source provides direct evidence or firsthand testimony, while a secondary source analyzes or interprets primary data (Booth et al., 2008)
7. Socially Aware:
Being mindful of social issues and understanding how one's actions affect others and society (Goleman, 2006).
8. Ethical Motivation:
The internal drive to behave according to moral values and principles, influencing responsible decision-making (Schwartz, 2001).

The Study Method

To explore the value-action gap in sustainable fashion among Gen Z consumers, qualitative interviews with three participants were conducted. Each participant was selected based on their age group and educational background, aligning with the target demographic of Gen Z students. The interviews were carried out between July 14-July 20, 2025 and each interview lasted 20-25 minutes. The participants included Krish Madnani, a 20-year-old student studying Sports Science who grew up in Hong Kong, Rasha Noor, also 20, a Pharmacology student originally from Dhaka, Bangladesh. A third participant, Eve Pentland is a 20 year old visual merchandiser for a florist company . All three participants identified as socially aware and have shopped sustainably in fashion.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both guided questions and the flexibility for participants to share their personal experiences and reflect in their own words. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed using a thematic approach. This was done by identifying recurring patterns, values and contradictions in the responses from all participants. Themes such as social media influence, peers and friends, ethical motivation, financial limitations and brand skepticism was noticed. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of how Gen Z individuals navigate the tension between sustainable fashion values and actual purchasing of sustainable clothing.

The Findings

Social media has emerged as one of the most influential platforms for raising awareness about environmental issues, leading viewers to learn about sustainable fashion. All three participants in the study mentioned their usage of platforms like Instagram, YouTube and sustainability blogs to discover ecofriendly brands and understand ethical practices within the fashion industry. Krish Madnani, the first interviewee, explained “I mostly learn about sustainable brands through Instagram, since that’s the platform I use the most. I follow a few creators and pages that focus on sustainable fashion, and they often highlight brands I might not have found otherwise. It’s really helpful because they break down why certain brands are more eco-friendly and help me understand what to look for in terms of ethical practices and certifications”. This was similar to Eve’s response when she was asked where she discovered sustainable brands, she said “Mostly through social media, blogs, and YouTube reviews. I follow some sustainability-focused and their content helps me discover and vet new brands”. This helped her recognize greenwashing and find truly sustainable options. These platforms were often preferred over traditional advertising or websites as the information was more accessible and easier to understand, especially when shared by peers/influencers in her age group.

Despite their different backgrounds, all respondents expressed common values that influenced their fashion choices. These included environmental protection, ethical working practices and the fight against animal cruelty. The third participant, Rasha, emphasized the impact of environmental damage that she had witnessed herself. She stated “I visited a factory once which was producing clothing for fast fashion brands. Examining the scraps and left overs i also noticed how damaging it was for Bangladesh environment along with the unethical working conditions”. This reinforced her commitment to sustainability, having her shop from more sustainable brands. Similarly, Krish emphasized choosing quality over quantity, while Eve reflected on her changing priorities. She explained “While I used to prioritize style and price, now I actively consider materials, production methods, and brand transparency when making a purchase”. These reflections show that Gen Z’s sustainable fashion choices are closely linked to their ethical concerns and thinking in the long-term.

Participants also described how social media helped them turn awareness and values into action through real-life examples. Stories about sustainable brand initiatives such as Patagonia’s circular economy or Tentree’s tree planting model, motivated them to support such brands. For example, Eve mentioned that after seeing an Instagram post explaining that Tentree plants a tree for every purchase, she bought a hoodie. Krish also felt compelled to support Patagonia after learning about their environmental efforts. These cases suggest that concrete examples of brand initiatives build trust and encourage sustainable behavior, especially when shared on social platforms in an engaging and informative way.

The influence of social networks offline was another key factor in shaping sustainable fashion choices. Krish noted “The people around me, especially friends and family, definitely influence the way I think about sustainability and fashion. A few people close to me are very conscious of their environmental impact, and their habits have rubbed off on me”. Similarly, Rasha praised her roommate by saying “My roommate Mahdiya has studied sustainable fashion hence educated me”. This influence was often amplified through social media communities where influencers exemplify sustainable behavior or hold brands accountable.

The interviewees also reported that they felt more confident in their clothing choices when these were confirmed from their friends on social media.

Despite high awareness and strong values, practical hurdles often prevent participants from consistently buying sustainable fashion. Price was the most frequently mentioned obstacle. All three interviewees reported cases where they wanted to buy sustainable fashion but chose cheaper alternatives due to budget constraints or urgent need. For example; Krish said "One of the biggest barriers for me is definitely the price. There was a time when I needed a winter jacket and just couldn't afford to buy a sustainably made one, so I ended up getting something cheaper from a fast-fashion retailer....As a student, I don't have an unlimited budget, and sometimes immediate needs or costs just outweigh my values". Another example is when Eve said "I urgently needed a coat and couldn't afford a sustainable one, so I bought it from a fast fashion retailer instead". Rasha added "It's usually very expensive and hard to find particular items that I am looking for. Sustainable fashion can be more high end in terms of pricing hence hard to afford as a student".

Another finding was Gen Z's skepticism towards sustainability promises made by brands. All interviewees expressed concerns about greenwashing and stated that they did not take sustainability promises seriously. To verify brand statements, the participants checked product materials, searched for third-party certifications (Fair Trade) and read transparency reports from the brands. Social media also played a role here, allowing them to recognize which companies were really committed to sustainability and which were using it as a marketing strategy.

Discussion

These interviews show a greater understanding of how sustainability is seen through the lens of Gen Z consumers. Throughout each of our interviews many key themes came to light such as the significance of what sustainable fashion has to offer, the tension between both values and affordability and the influence that social media has on purchasing behaviours.

All of the people that we interviewed defined sustainable fashion as more than just sustainable clothing they all were aware of labour practices, environmental harm, and long lasting product quality. Throughout all interviews the idea of fashion responsible yet expressive was really highlighted.

A challenge that arose with all of our interviews was how much more expensive sustainable fashion is. Even though all 3 people have a strong idea and view on sustainability they all have made decisions to shop at non sustainable stores due to the affordability of sustainable clothing pieces. Krish mentioned that she prefers to shop sustainable but urgent needs like a winter coat forced her to choose the fast fashion alternative. This demonstrates how sustainability is valued but not always the easiest to get our hands on due to the price.

Though the interviews specific brands were mentioned repeatedly such as Patagonia, Tentree and Reformation all our interviews praised these brands for being highly sustainable and following all eco-friendly decisions. This revealed that other than the price, many consumers are highly motivated by mission driven actions. One of our interviews revealed

that they had visited a garment factory over in Bangladesh and witnessed firsthand the unethical labour practices and environmental damage with the fast fashion industry. From that experience it really shaped them to learn and be more informed on sustainable decisions especially seeing it first hand it shows the powerful impact of that experience and how it can really change an outlook on the fast fashion industry.

A lot of influence from our interviewees came from family and friends who are educated on sustainable fashion. These influencers have helped our interviews have a change in perception on decision making when it comes to clothing. But mainly social media was seen as the primary source from when our interviews got their information from influences online whom they follow have promoted ethical practices which initially helps them make their decision on what places to buy from. This helps to reflect on the Gen Z visual platform access to verify sustainability.

Despite knowing all the factors about sustainable fashion and all the barriers we face when purchasing clothing items our interviews recognised that it is their own decision that has to make a change

Conclusion

This study shows that social media is a key tool in shaping the awareness, values and behavior of Gen Z in relation to sustainable fashion. It informs consumers, reinforces their ethical values, provides motivating examples and connects them with supportive communities. Despite this influence, real barriers such as cost, lack of availability and lack of transparency continue to limit their ability to shop sustainably. Remarkably, Gen Z is not only informed but also critical as they are willing to take action when possible, but also careful of brand narratives. Social media plays an important role as it empowers consumers but at the same time makes them more selective. With their growing purchasing power, the potential impact of this digital influence could contribute significantly to the future of sustainable fashion consumption.

References

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- What does the research tell us?
- How do our research findings relate to existing research?