

Exploring Perceptions of Climate-Aware Generation-Z Towards Fast-Fashion Corporations' Responsibility

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Abstract

Background scientific research: Growing concern for the climate-crisis has led to the emergence of sustainable communication efforts by businesses, following a demand by consumers for ethical consumption (Granskog et al., 2020). This is evident within the fashion industry, where fashion marketing focuses on sustainability in response to criticisms that fast-fashion is inherently unsustainable (Ritch, 2021). As a result, there is a feeling that to propagate change, activism is required to instigate sustainability as a priority for governments, businesses, and citizens. Often activists believe that changing the current capitalist economic system is necessary to mitigate imminent climate breakdown (Grossmann, 2022; United Nations, 2021) and that the global North is responsible for unethical, neo-colonial practices that are based on the exploitation of the global South (UNEP, 2021). This notion of applying a political lens reflects debates around citizenship and consumerism (Gabriel and Lang, 1995), with citizens assuming responsibility for equality and the well-being of all, and consumers focusing on commodity value. Increasingly, in the northern sphere, consumers actively oppose exploitative production and embrace ethical consumption (Vajkai Kovács and Zsóka, 2020). This aligns with adopting a citizen approach, where consumers' position spending behaviour as economic voting, in which brands engaging in unethical practices are actively boycotted or avoided (Vringer et al., 2017). In particular, Generation-Z are influential in driving the market toward sustainable offerings (Kyroglou and Henn, 2021). They are the first generation to be educated in sustainability from a young age and the rise in media outlets reporting on sustainability has resulted in this cohort developing concern for their future and that of the planet (Seemiller and Grace, 2019). This cohort encompass characteristics of climate awareness, critical-thinking skills and general concern for imminent climate damage and can therefore evaluate corporations' responsibility for sustainability. Generation-Z are often regarded as politically involved climate-activists (Seemiller and Grace, 2019); however, rising numbers in fast-fashion purchases and throwaway consumption amongst Generation-Z (Kale, 2021) pose the question of whether Generation-Z apply a critical lens to fast-fashion sustainability marketing.

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Increasingly, current fast-fashion business allude to CER (Corporate Environmental Responsibility) marketing strategies often receive scepticism and criticism of greenwashing by Generation-Z (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Companies acknowledge demands for sustainability by addressing social responsibility in advertising (Croson and Treich, 2014), such as announcing improvement in production and recycling processes, and prompting individuals to shop more sustainably (Carvill et al., 2021). Current qualitative studies exploring CER communications suggest higher scepticism amongst climate-aware and concerned respondents towards sustainable advertising (Luo et al., 2020) and buying sustainably and buying less (Kim et al., 2018). Yet, research lacks the concentration of consumer's perception behind green marketing and greenwashing (Hesse and Rünz 2020).

Research issue to be addressed: This research investigates Generation-Z 's perception of fast-fashion CER, since this cohort are characterised as highly critical future change-makers and becoming influential spenders (Bowman, 2019). Consumer perceptive research behind CER motives is outdated (Vlachos et al., 2009) and would benefit from a fresh evaluation on how fashion-brands address CER to appeal to Generation-Z. The study will examine the allure of fast-fashion as evoking hedonism (Di Benedetto, 2017) with the juxtaposition of sustainable consumption (Cairns et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Despite the industry being largely responsible for unethical and unsustainable production, many fashion-brand communicate apparent sustainable efforts with terminology of carbon-neutrality and circular economy, yet this masks the reality (Sailer et al., 2022). Scientists claim this is greenwashing, but consumer perception, specifically Generation-Z', has yet to be investigated (McCarthy, 2021; Pearce, 2021). Adopting CER as a marketing strategy invites speculation about whether Generation-Z expects transparent communication from corporations on their sustainable efforts. Hence, this research seeks to explore how climate-aware Generation-Z students perceive fashion corporations' sustainability responsibility and the side effect of greenwashing.

Methodology used: To examine this proposition, the methodology adopted an interpretive inductive philosophy of qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore Generation-Z's perspective of sustainable fast-fashion marketing (Saunders et al., 2019). Whilst similar previous studies have gathered quantitative data (Busser and Shulga, 2019; De Jong et al., 2018) this has only delivered a general facile perspective of greenwashing and it was considered that understanding how perceptions were thought through in a fashion context would generate more insight (Szmigin et al., 2008). Purposive, convenient, and homogenous sampling of ten Generation-Z final year university students from Glasgow (Scotland) (Saunders et al., 2019), who described themselves as climate aware, were carried out in January 2022. Questions were divided in four topics: climate awareness, responsibility for sustainability; CER and reflections on two fast-fashion sustainability campaigns. Thematic analysis was used to identify overarching themes and patterns (Liamputtong, 2013).

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: This research contributes to theoretical development by examining Generation-Z as they evolve from passive consumption behaviours into activate citizens keen to shape a new sustainable marketplace. Incorporating CER as a framework to examine Generation-Z has so far been neglected in the literature, as has using current sustainable fast-fashion marketing examples to elicit opinion. Examining Generation-Z as they emerge from education and move into the workplace provides a novel insight into how they believe economic models should function, who is responsible for ensuring sustainable markets and what is expected from marketing communications. This research provides a unique opportunity to examine reflections of sustainability claims from fast-fashion marketing campaigns that allude to CER and how climate awareness constructs interpretation of core messages, and understandings around terminology such as 'carbon-neutrality' and 'circular economy'. While those concepts are not new, they are often applied as a potential solution to encourage more consumption. Yet, the research identified notable climate awareness, criticism of current economic models and scepticism of superficial CER responses that were considered as greenwashing. To combat this, the participants had reduced consumption behaviour and boycotted what they perceived to be unethical brands and products. Understanding this cohort offers insight for industry practitioners on what is expected of governance, production and supply chain management, end of product life and communication. For brands to appeal to Gen-Z, it is recommended to communicate transparency and ownership of the climate damage.

Keywords: generation-Z; fast-fashion; greenwashing; sustainability; corporate environmental responsibility.

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