

Gen Z's Perception of Sustainable Fashion and its Marketing in Canada

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SSM1100 - Research Paper

Background

- The high environmental and social burden of the fashion industry¹ has led to the government, non-profit organizations, and consumers demanding that brands become more responsible and sustainable^{2,3}
- These pressures have led to fashion companies making supply chain changes to reduce emissions and waste and offer more sustainably produced clothing⁴
- Brands have also begun heavily marketing their sustainability efforts as it has a positive effect on brand image and in relationship building with customers⁵
- There are still issues around sustainable fashion adoption as sustainably produced clothing comes at higher prices⁶ and consumers have doubts about the green claims made by fashion brands⁷
- Studies in the UK⁸ and USA⁹ have found that Gen Z consumers are more likely to shop sustainably than older generations due to their deeper understanding of global sustainability issues and socio-economic factors
- There is a lack of research on Gen Z's perception of sustainable fashion and its marketing in the Canadian context, with minimal studies employing primary data collection methods like surveys and interviews

Research Question: What are Canadian Gen Z's perceptions of sustainable fashion and sustainability-oriented marketing in the fashion industry?

Methods

Phase 1 Background Literature Review

- A background literature review was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of sustainable fashion, its marketing, and Gen Z's apparel buying behavior
- The literature review served as a base for survey development

Phase 2 Survey Development & Administration

- A survey was developed consisting of both closed and open-ended questions
- The survey consisted of questions related to the general buying habits of Gen Z, their familiarity with sustainable fashion, their perception of sustainability-oriented fashion marketing, and barriers and future motivators

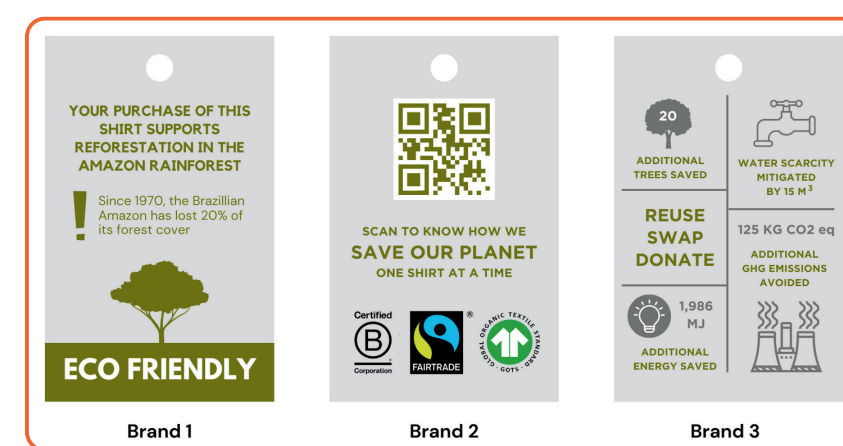


Figure 1: Different types of clothing eco-labels



Figure 2: Comparison of price, reviews & eco-labels



Figure 3: Product Feature Ad vs. Sustainability Focused Ad

- The survey was distributed to the ENV100 student pool at the University of Toronto and self-administered through the Google Forms platform

Phase 3 Data Analysis

- 750+ responses were manually reviewed for clarity and correctness
- Quantitative data was analyzed through descriptive statistics and qualitative responses were coded using NVivo to analyze and thematically group data

Findings

Clothing Price Outweighs All Other Factors

- Clothing price, quality, and style are the most important factors considered by responders when purchasing apparel
- Similarly, the higher cost of sustainable clothing is the biggest hindrance in getting Gen Z to choose sustainable fashion alternatives
- The study also found that Gen Z is highly likely to shift brand preferences upon finding a sustainable alternative, but they are not willing to pay more for the sustainable option

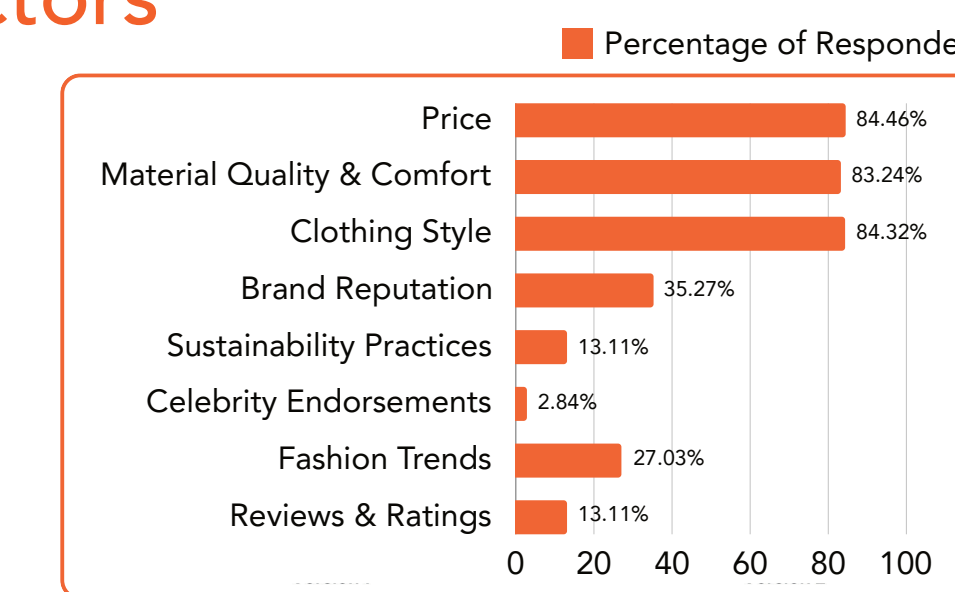


Figure 4: Most important factors while purchasing clothes

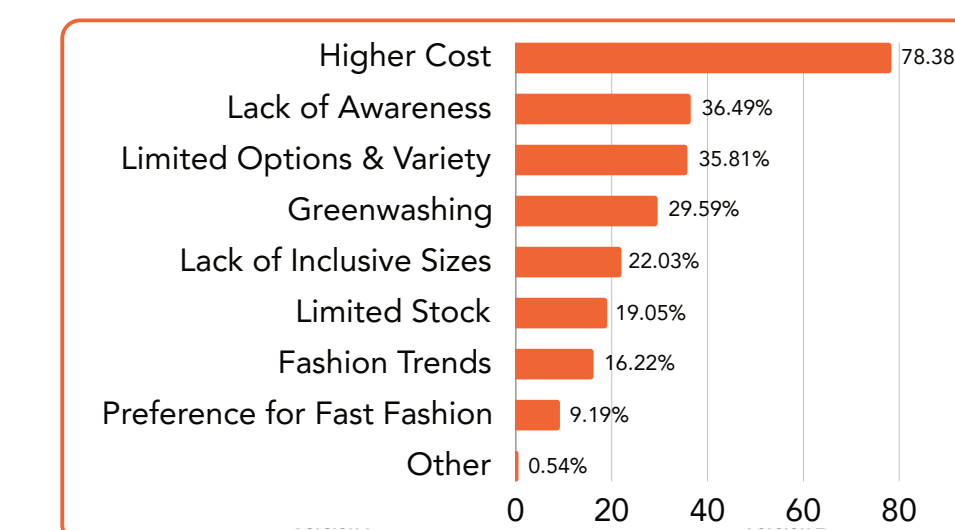


Figure 5: Barriers in sustainable fashion adoption

Gap Between Sustainability Awareness & Sustainability Action

- Responders showed a low level of awareness of sustainable fashion (39.05%), and upon being asked if they were aware of the environmental and social impacts of the clothes they wear, only 24.19% said yes
- Low levels of awareness combined with a preference for making value-based decisions directly impact sustainable purchasing behavior
- The discrepancy between sustainability awareness and action needs to be addressed by enhancing buyer's knowledge about sustainability and sustainable consumer practices^{10,11}

Positive Response Towards Eco-Labels

- Responders showed selective reciprocity towards sustainability-oriented marketing with a higher positive reception for eco-labels as they help easily understand a brand's sustainability efforts and make buyers feel happier about their purchase decisions
- Responders also perceive sustainability as a marker of enhanced quality for products commanding significant investment such as winter jackets and boots
- There remains skepticism towards the legitimacy of eco-labels as some responders displayed feelings of doubt regarding their credibility or wanting further verification of green claims made by brands
- The study also revealed that while Gen Z responds positively to eco-labels, they primarily prioritize product attributes over sustainability indicators

Desire to Buy More Sustainable Fashion in the Future

- The majority of survey respondents indicated their intention to increase their purchases of sustainable fashion in the future
- An increase in sustainable fashion adoption will require addressing producer barriers such as price and variety, and a lack of awareness from the consumer's side
- Responders also indicated that information found through traditional news and social media helps identify sustainable products, suggesting a growing dissemination of sustainability-related information through these channels

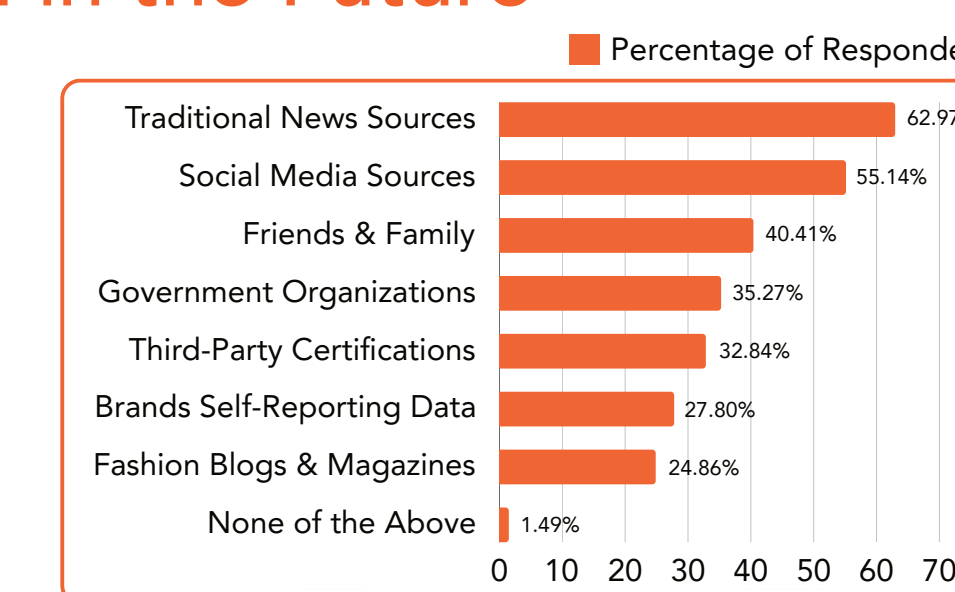


Figure 6: Information sources that would help Gen Z in identifying sustainable fashion

Recommendations

- The government should introduce regulations around green claims to ensure their credibility such as the "Greenwashing Directive"¹² being proposed by the EU that will implement specific rules on sustainability and environmental claims
- Brands should work on introducing a range of sustainable clothing at various price points to accommodate the budget constraints of Gen Z buyers. This could include offering basic sustainably produced clothes that are more affordable, while also providing premium options for those willing to invest more in higher-end sustainable pieces
- There needs to be concerted action by the fashion industry and governmental entities to strategically use social media platforms to spread information on sustainable fashion and purchasing. Studies have found that due to the notable internet literacy of Gen Z, social media can have a sizeable impact on their purchasing behavior and attitude toward sustainability^{13,14}
- The study also noted that some respondents learned about sustainability in college courses. Integrating sustainability education into school and university curriculums can empower students to make more informed choices early on

Conclusion

- This exploratory search revealed Gen Z's value-dominant decision-making behaviour and the efficacy of sustainability-oriented marketing in positively influencing brand image and relationship building with customers
- This study calls for reducing the gap between sustainability awareness and action among Gen Z by focusing on efficient dissemination of information and increased transparency from companies in the fashion industry
- Future research can focus on conducting inter-generational studies aimed at understanding how the same factors affect different generations and exploration of sustainability-oriented marketing beyond those addressed here

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