

The Sustainable Fashion Paradox: Understanding the Gap Between Gen Z's Climate Commitment and Their Fashion Consumption Behavior

By Katie Wenwan Guo

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Katie Wenwan Guo is a Grade 11 student at Lord Byng Secondary School in Vancouver, Canada. She has long been concerned with sustainability, visual culture, and youth action, and has explored how young people engage with social issues through art and creativity. Her current research focuses on Gen Z, sustainable fashion, and ethical brand communication.

ABSTRACT

Many Gen Z consumers claim to be concerned about climate change and supportive of sustainable consumption. Yet their actual fashion purchasing behavior is different as fast fashion remains their primary choice. This study explores this contradiction by asking to what extent Gen Z's climate commitment influences their fashion purchasing behavior, and what key factors contribute to this value-action gap.

To address this question, the study combines retail field observations in New York, USA and Beijing, China, semi-structured interviews with fashion industry professionals, and a survey of 200 Gen Z respondents across different regions. The findings show that this value-action gap is not simply a matter of personal hypocrisy among young consumers or misleading sustainability claims from brands. Instead, the gap comes from the fashion industry system and real consumption settings, including limited retail visibility, accessibility, affordability and aesthetic appeal.

This study argues that for sustainable fashion to become part of Gen Z's daily fashion consumption, the fashion industry needs to move beyond conveying sustainable branding narratives and make practical changes in price, style, store presentation, communication, social media influence, and community engagement.

Keywords: *sustainable fashion, Generation Z, value-action gap, fast fashion, consumer behavior, ethical branding, social media, retail visibility, youth culture, climate commitment*

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

The global fashion industry is one of the largest contributors to environmental degradation, accounting for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of wastewater worldwide (Wyshelesky, 2025; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) has emerged as a cohort defined by environmental awareness (Deloitte, 2025). A 2021 survey conducted by First Insight and the Baker Retailing Center at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania suggests that approximately 75% of Gen Z prefer sustainable products over brand names (World Economic Forum, 2022).

However, there is a disturbing paradox under this surface-level consistency. Although Gen Z consumers claim to hold environmental values, they still continue to purchase fast fashion at a significant rate. Despite these values, a study of U.S. Gen Z college students found that fast fashion consumption remained prevalent despite growing sustainability awareness (Kang & Badal, 2025). Beyond the U.S. context, according to a FashionNetwork report on the Consumer Navigator report, about 35% of British consumers shop on fast fashion platform at least twice a month, and 24% of Gen Z consumers receive fast fashion products every week (FashionNetwork.com, 2025). A Vogue Business survey further confirmed that even after learning about unethical industry practices, half of the Gen Z respondents still wanted to buy fast fashion, while 70% believed that sustainability was important when buying fashion products (Maguire & Arnett, 2020).

Research Questions

This study explores the following research questions:

- To what extent is Gen Z's climate commitment reflected in their fashion consumption behaviors?
- What factors contribute to the inconsistency between sustainability values and actual purchasing behaviors?

Based on the observation of the retail industry in New York and Beijing, interviews with industry experts and influencers, and a survey of 200 Gen Z consumers across different regions, this paper concludes that structural barriers within the retail environment, cultural pressure from social media and abstract communication strategies collectively help to explain the observed value-action gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gen Z and Environmental Consciousness

Generation Z has grown up in a period of heightened climate awareness, which has shaped how young people understand identity, lifestyle, and consumption. Research suggests that Gen Z is more likely than older generations to connect sustainability with personal values and purchasing decisions (Deloitte, 2025; Tran et al., 2022).

However, a cross-generational study found that although Gen Z showed higher environmental awareness than the previous generation, such as baby boomers and Generation X, their actual participation in sustainable consumption in a variety of product categories, including fashion, electronic products and household products, was still relatively low (Taborecka et al., 2025). This finding challenges the hypothesis that environmental awareness is automatically transformed into sustainable purchasing behavior, and emphasizes the need to study the mediating factors such as price sensitivity, social impact and product availability.

The Value-Action Gap

The value-action gap is widely documented in the literature on sustainable consumption. Niinimäki et al. (2020) suggest that despite the increased awareness of sustainability, consumer behavior is still seriously affected by price, convenience and trend cycle. Research using the theory of planned behavior has identified a number of influencing factors, including economic constraints, limited product availability and competitive priorities (Rahaman, 2025).

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE FASHION

Structural barriers do not only exist at the level of consumer purchasing behavior. More importantly, they are rooted throughout the lifecycle of fashion products, including sustainable material research and sourcing, production and supply-chain systems, retail visibility, and the broader market and consumption environment. At present, the fashion industry still operates around low cost, fast scaling, and high efficiency, which creates significant structural challenges for sustainable fashion in terms of scalability, affordability, and market accessibility (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Meanwhile, many luxury brands and fashion leaders have increasingly promoted sustainability, but in many cases, sustainability still functions more as part of branding narratives than as a real driver of mainstream

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fashion trends and aesthetics. This limits the broader cultural influence of sustainable fashion within mainstream consumer behavior (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

CULTURAL AND PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS

Cultural and perceptual barriers include perceived barriers related to taste, identity and cultural norms. Specifically, sustainable fashion is often perceived as aesthetically limited, less trend-driven, and less visually appealing compared with fast fashion (Rahaman, 2025). Gen Z consumers often view fashion as a form of individual personality, identity expression and social belonging rather than simply for practical use (Kantarcıoğlu & Kubat Dokumacı, 2025). However, current sustainable fashion aesthetics and culture do not fully align with Gen Z identity systems and digital trend culture.

GREENWASHING AND CONSUMER SKEPTICISM

Marketing researchers have extensively documented the growing popularity of greenwashing - the practice of brands promoting sustainability-related claims without implementing meaningful environmental changes (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Especially in the fashion industry, research shows that more than 60% of the sustainability claims of major brands are misleading or unproven (RetailBoss, 2025).

This phenomenon has aroused great suspicion among consumers, especially among the digital native Gen Z consumers. The research on Gen Z's response to greenwashing reveals a paradox: even if young consumers are suspicious of misleading claims, many people still intend to buy fast fashion products - part of the reason for this model is optimistic bias, that is, consumers overestimate their ability to identify greenwashing (Haque & Lang, 2025; Balaskas et al., 2025).

RESEARCH GAP

Although the existing literature has identified the value-action gap in sustainable fashion consumption, limited research has examined the actual presentation and dissemination of sustainability in physical retail stores. Most studies focus on consumer attitudes or online behavior, but there is a gap in understanding the store environment.

In addition, few studies combine consumer survey data with professional views of the industry, and often rely on consumers' self-reporting. This study addresses these gaps by combining retail observations in New York and Beijing, a survey of 200 Gen Z consumers, and interviews with professionals in the fashion industry.

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METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology combining three data collection methods including retail field observation, industry interviews and consumer survey.

Retail Field Observation

From July to August 2025, retail field observation was conducted in UNIQLO, Urban Outfitters, Muji, TOTEME and JNBY stores in New York and Beijing. The observation focuses on the visibility of sustainable products, popularity in the store, pricing and labeling and sustainable communication.

Industry Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five professionals in the fashion industry: David Liu (Chairman of Weber Shandwick China), Li Liang (Senior Communication Manager, Nike China), Uncle Na (Pioneer of Vintage Fashion), Kana Siyuan MA (Co-founder of Shopshops) and Professor Hye Yeon Jeong (an expert on sustainable fashion and the circular economy).

Consumer Survey

A consumer survey of 200 Gen Z consumers was conducted to assess purchase frequency, decision-making factors, willingness to pay premium prices, and knowledge of product sources.

FINDINGS

Branding vs Retail Reality

Field observations show that although sustainability messages have been widely conveyed through branding narratives, e.g., websites, advertisements and social media, it is difficult to identify sustainable products in physical stores, especially within fast-fashion-dominated commercial spaces. In the SoHo area of New York City, a staff member of Urban Outfitters revealed that due to "low customer demand", the previously large vintage collection area has been reduced. Sustainability has become part of mainstream branding language, but many brands still have not transformed sustainability into a truly engaging retail experience for consumers, especially Gen Z shoppers.

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Meanwhile, the survey results show that although most Gen Z are supportive of sustainable fashion, more than 54% of respondents agree it is difficult to find sustainable options in stores. David Liu, former Chairman of Weber Shandwick China, described Gen Z as both "amplifier and lie detector" (D. Liu, personal communication, August 15, 2025). In his view, Gen Z tends to support and promote brands they perceive as genuinely sustainable, while quickly identifying and criticizing superficial or misleading sustainability claims. He stressed that successful sustainable communication must go beyond "verbal commitment" to participatory action.

Aesthetics, Identity and Trend Culture

The research shows that Gen Z consumers claim to be positive toward sustainability. But in real buying situations, style, design, identity expression and social engagement remain more direct motivations for purchase decisions than sustainability. Survey results show that more than 50% of respondents prefer the styles of preppy and artsy, while various aesthetic categories, e.g., sports/active wear, streetwear, gender-fluid and vintage/thrifted styles also appear at relatively high percentages.

It is also found that many sustainable fashion brands prioritize minimalist aesthetics, natural materials and ethical positioning, which often lack aesthetic appeal and trend relevance for Gen Z consumers. Uncle Na, a vintage store owner in Beijing Sanlitun, also noted that vintage fashion carries stronger collectible value and emotional attachment than fast fashion, which makes it more connected to identity and personal style (L. Na, personal communication, August 10, 2025). Li Liang of Nike China mentioned that young people hope that sustainability can be combined with fashion and trends, making it something they are truly willing to buy into (L. Liang, personal communication, August 26, 2025).

Participation and Social Engagement

Gen Z consumers would welcome transparency, participation, and social engagement more than branding narratives and ethical messaging alone. During the interview with Li Liang of Nike China, she noted that young people want to see that a brand's environmental actions are traceable and real (L. Liang, personal communication, August 26, 2025). She also introduced a successful social media campaign that deeply engaged young communities by recycling out-of-fashion sneakers to help rebuild a football ground through popular social media platforms in China such as Alipay and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book). Sustainability can gradually merge into young consumers' daily culture and consumption behaviors through social media, community participation, and more engaging communication.

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In addition to the interview responses above, our survey also reflects that 72.9% of respondents prefer shopping for sustainable fashion online, compared to 61.4% offline. Many respondents are influenced by online trend culture, peer influence, and the social media environment. Compared with simply highlighting social responsibility and ethical messaging, sustainability communication through interaction, participation, and community engagement appears easier to gain attention and recognition from young consumers.

Price, Accessibility and Structural Barriers

The research shows that price, convenience and accessibility continue to be critical elements influencing the real purchasing behaviors of Gen Z. In the survey, more than 65% of respondents expected the price of sustainable clothing, such as T-shirts, to remain within the range of \$20–60, as affordable as fast fashion, despite the high production costs associated with ethical sourcing, sustainable materials and fair labor practices. In the retail visits, the labeling and presentation of sustainable products were often vague or missing, which resulted in reduced visibility and recognition of sustainable products among consumers.

The challenges of sustainable fashion are derived not only from public awareness, but also from the long-term system structure of the fashion industry, which has developed around low cost, rapid production and fast trend cycles. Kana Ma, Founder of ShopShops, similarly pointed out that the contradiction between Gen Z's sustainability values and actual purchasing behavior is closely related to price sensitivity, platform convenience and broader supply-chain structures within the fashion industry (K. S. Ma, personal communication, September 8, 2025).

Professor Hye Yeon Jeong, a researcher in fashion circular economy, further pointed out that sustainability should extend beyond production itself, including consumer participation in maintenance, reuse and product life cycle extension (H. Y. Jeong, personal communication, November 20, 2025).

Survey Results: Quantitative Patterns in the Value-Action Gap

The survey of 200 Gen Z respondents revealed several patterns.

Among Gen Z consumers, environmental awareness is relatively high. However, the level of environmental concern still varies significantly. 21.4% of the respondents "really care" about climate change, 48.6% "care a little", and 30% do not care much. However, many respondents actively engage in eco-conscious daily habits: 59.2% save water, 53.5% use public transport, and 49.3% use reusable containers.

Fast fashion still dominates real purchasing behavior. Although 64.8% of respondents shop sustainable brands, 49.3% still purchase fast fashion. The main purchasing motivations are peer influence (57.7%), style/aesthetics (54.9%) and brand reputation (52.1%), while sustainability is only 35.2%.

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Price sensitivity is a key obstacle. Only 40.8% of respondents are willing to pay more for sustainable clothing. Most respondents expect a price range \$20-\$60 for sustainable clothing (such as a T-shirt), which is similar to the typical fast fashion products. But at the same price level, more than 60% of respondents will or may pay for sustainable clothing, rather than fast fashion.

The survey also explores the perceived causes of the value-action gap. When the respondents were asked an open-ended question: "Why do you think Gen Z cares about the environment but still buy fast fashion?" The most frequently cited reasons are:

- Lack of awareness of fast fashion impact (76.1%)
- Feeling individual actions do not matter (59.2%)
- Difficulty finding sustainable options (52.1%)
- Social media pressure (42.3%)
- High prices (40.8%)

These self-reported barriers confirm that the gap is not caused by a single factor, but by cross-cutting information, motivation, structure and economic constraints.

DISCUSSION

The Structural Nature of the Gap

The research results show that Gen Z's commitment is only partially reflected in their fashion consumption. This is not mainly because of personal moral failure, but because in the current retail environment, sustainable choices are often not visible, accessible or attractive enough. The findings suggest that the current retail environment does not naturally guide consumers toward sustainable choices. In many cases, sustainable products are less visible, less promoted and more difficult to identify, while fast fashion occupies the dominant visual and commercial space. This is consistent with the view of "structural barriers" in the literature on sustainable consumption (Rahaman, 2025).

Five Interrelated Mechanisms Behind the Value–Action Gap

First, limited visibility and unclear communication undermine sustainable consumption. When it is difficult to find sustainable products, even active consumers face high search costs.

Second, there are structural constraints on price and accessibility, especially when the disposable income of Gen Z is limited.

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Third, aesthetic taste and trend culture dominate the purchase decision. Sustainable fashion is usually regarded as "basic and minimalist aesthetics", which does not align with current trend aesthetics or visual styles.

Fourth, Gen Z is more easily attracted to and involved in sustainability activities with transparency, participation and community engagement than in abstract responsibility or ethical messaging.

Fifth, fast-changing trend culture, accessibility of fast fashion and social consumption pressure further reinforce the value-action gap.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a double-edged sword for Gen Z consumers, simultaneously promoting sustainability awareness while encouraging trend-driven overconsumption. Research shows that both brand-generated and user-generated content will positively affect the sustainable fashion purchase of Gen Z (El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025). However, social media has also accelerated the trend cycle and created peer pressure for frequent clothing changes.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the survey sample (n=200) is relatively small and cannot represent the global Gen Z population. Secondly, retail observation is limited to New York and Beijing, so the research results may not be extended to other regions. Third, because this study did not use experimental intervention or detailed behavioral segmentation, the findings mainly reflect broader consumption patterns rather than strict causal relationships. Fourth, self-reported behavior may be affected by social expectation bias.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Summary of Findings

This study investigates the extent to which Gen Z's climate commitment is reflected in their fashion choices. The research results show that although Gen Z demonstrates genuine concern for environmental issues, due to structural barriers, including limited retail visibility, affordability, aesthetic restrictions and the communication strategies that make sustainability feel abstract rather than interactive, this commitment is not consistently translated into purchasing behavior.

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The key is that this gap cannot be reduced to personal hypocrisy. Instead, it comes from a retail system that systemically favors fast fashion through lower prices, higher visibility, faster trend replication and more complex marketing.

Strategic Implications for Brands

For brands seeking to bridge this gap, there are several strategic implications:

First, visibility is important. Sustainable choices must be prominently combined with clear labels and transparent communication on environmental attributes.

Second, price affordability needs innovation. Price sensitivity will remain an obstacle until sustainable fashion and fast fashion achieve cost parity. Brands may explore the leasing models or take-back programs offering discounts on future purchases.

Third, aesthetics cannot be sacrificed. Sustainable fashion must compete in design, trend consistency and self-expression.

Fourth, participation drives engagement. Initiatives that invite consumers to do something - repair shops, customization activities, recycling programs - generate greater participation than passive information.

Fifth, social media communication and storytelling must be strategic. Brands should embed the environmental attribute in the cultural narrative to resonate with the authenticity and creative values of Gen Z.

Future Research Directions

Future research should experimentally test specific intervention measures, and longitudinally track Gen Z consumer behavior as this group grows older, conducting cross-cultural comparisons to identify the policy and market conditions that can help reduce the sustainability value-action gap.

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