

Sustainability in the Apparel Industry: Exploring Buying Behaviors of Consumers from Four Generational Cohorts

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Background & Significance

Sustainability in the apparel industry is a broad term that people interpret in different ways. The concept of sustainability is multifaceted, and it can encompass “the environment and its people, a philosophy balancing ethics and morality with profit, and an emphasis on the business actions and strategies resulting in positive outcomes for people and the environment” (Dickson & Eckman, 2006, p. 178). Specific examples include companies taking a highly proactive approach to protect people and the environment such as initiating fair-trade products, sweatshop-free labor conditions, and pro-environmental attributes (e.g., organic, recycled). Previous studies argue that consumers need further education on the issue of sustainability in the apparel industry to increase their knowledge and sustainable buying behaviors (Zhang et al., 2021; Connell, 2010). The main focus of research in the literature has been educating young consumers (Diddi et al., 2019) and there are limited studies examining consumers’ knowledge and buying behaviors from different generational cohorts. In this regard, it is important to understand different generations’ knowledge of sustainability in the apparel industry and their apparel buying behaviors.

Purpose & Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study was to explore different generational cohorts apparel buying behaviors and see how this impacts sustainability in the fashion industry. Specific research questions include a) How do consumers from different generations (Generation X, Y, Z, and Baby Boomers) define sustainability in the apparel industry? and b) what are the perceived apparel buying behaviors of consumers from the four different generations and how does this impact sustainability in the fast fashion industry? This study adopted the generational cohort theory which states that when a group of people have gone through similar life events, they can form similar habits and behaviors that divide them into generational cohorts (Parment, 2013). Thus, when similarities exist between certain age groups, it is easier for a business to analyze their purchasing behaviors.

Method

An online survey was sent out through a convenience sampling method and a total of 167 participants from the four generational cohorts completed the survey. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions that helped gain a better understanding of consumers’ knowledge, attitudes towards sustainability in the apparel industry and general and sustainable buying behaviors. Content analysis was conducted for the qualitative data from the open-ended questions (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative data from the closed-ended questions using the Qualtrics data analysis service.

Results & Discussions

Participants in this study included respondents ages 18-75 years, both males and females. The respondents were divided into their corresponding generational cohorts: Gen Z (N=79), Gen Y (N=21), Gen X (N=41), and Baby Boomers (N=26). The mean age of Gen Z respondents was 20.48 years old, Gen Y respondents was 30.71 years old, Gen X respondents was 51.24 years old, and Baby Boomer respondents was 63.11 years old. More than 70% of the respondents from all generational cohorts were female. The analysis of the qualitative data showed several themes related to apparel buying behaviors: Accessibility (channels, materials), environmental attributes, recycling/repurposing, and social attributes (how and where clothing is made, fair labor, ethics). Gen Z actively repurposed and sold their own clothing whereas Baby Boomers did not engage in these activities. Price was the most important factor when making a purchase across all generations. The majority of the Baby Boomers believed the apparel industry to be “*probably*” sustainable whereas Gen Z indicated that it is “*definitely not*” and “*probably not*” sustainable.

The findings of this study further suggest that the youngest generation, Gen Z, is more aware of issues surrounding sustainability in the apparel industry. The Gen Z respondents were able to define sustainability in a detailed manner with specific terms compared to the other three generations being analyzed. The differences can be clearly shown from Table 1 which presents the dominant words that each generation used to define sustainability. Some examples of Gen Z definitions of sustainability include: “*clothing made from reusable, recyclable materials. Sustainable clothing is not just about materiality, it’s about changing the lifecycle of a clothing item. Cradle to cradle!*” [P19]. Many other participants responded with similar answers such as “*reduce environmental impact*” [P10], “*ethically made or repurposed*” [P50], and “*eco-centric approach to creating and repurposing items*” [P28]. The older generations had a harder time defining sustainability and about 40% of Gen X respondents could not define sustainability or did not give acceptable answers. Some examples of Gen X responses are: “*economy based*” [P86], “*fair wages*” [P96], “*where it is made*” [P88], and “*how it is made*” [P91]. Baby Boomers also struggled defining sustainability and about 40% of them gave non applicable answers.

Table 1. Tag cloud comparisons among four generations: Defining sustainability

The results of the study suggest that many consumers, particularly Gen X and Baby Boomers, have little to no education on the fashion industry and the unsustainable measures behind it. Therefore, more educational materials are needed for these consumers to be aware of their impact when they are shopping for apparel. The older generations (Baby Boomers and Gen X) have a lack of knowledge of sustainability compared to the youngest generation, Gen Z. The fashion industry should use this research to further educate consumers on all aspects of the clothing lifecycle. While the results showed some similar buying behavior patterns across the generations, it is still clear that each generation is different in their sustainable consumption patterns. Businesses can use this data to tailor their sustainable business model towards their own target market and educate consumers from different age cohorts to build a more sustainable environment for the apparel industry.

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