

Generation Z's Perception Regarding Fast Fashion Brand Greenwashing Phenomena

Md Nazmul Haque & Chunmin Lang, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, USA

Keywords: Greenwashing, Fast fashion, Generation Z, Cognitive

Individuals who were born between 1997 and 2012, known as generation Z (Gen Z) (Dimock, 2019), remains a major consumer of fast fashion in the U.S. Fast fashion brands, known for providing fashionable and contemporary apparel at affordable prices, align with the financial challenges encountered by numerous Gen Z consumers, who often experience economic limitations while managing education, entry-level employment, and economic instability and are drawn to clothing that is both accessible and economical (Zhang et al., 2021). As a result, they are the major targeted consumer for fast fashion brands. In 2023, Gen Z was the second biggest demographic group in the United States, with an anticipated population of 69.3 million (Korhonen, 2024). Research findings indicate that Gen Z has a pronounced addiction to fast fashion (Wojdyla & Chi, 2024); nonetheless, they also possess environmental concerns (Promalessy & Handriana, 2024; Um et al., 2024; Zimand-Sheiner & Lissitsa, 2024). There was a major research gap to evaluate their paradoxical consumption behavior. In addition, most of the research concentrated on either greenwashing and Gen Z (Linckens et al., 2024), fast fashion and greenwashing (Lu et al., 2022; Sun & Shi, 2022), or fast fashion and Gen Z (Wojdyla & Chi, 2024). In the context of the Indonesian fast fashion Gen Z consumers, the direct and indirect effects of greenwashing on negative green word of mouth have been explored (Promalessy & Handriana, 2024). A dearth of research specifically examined the impact of greenwashing on the U.S. Gen Z consumer in the context of fast-fashion promotional messages imbued with greenwashing features.

According to the psychology dimensional method, human emotions are typically classified into two categories: positive and negative. Additionally, products have the capacity to elicit a wide range of emotions, including both positive and negative ones (Desmet, 2012; Frijda et al., 1989). Within the same setting, we contend that fast fashion products elicit both positive and negative emotional reactions, contingent upon the consumer's behavioral intention and awareness of the product. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) the C-A-B paradigm with affective elements included the complete range of pertinent emotions encompassing a wide array of sentiments, such as affection, animosity, apprehension, bliss, ennui, unease, satisfaction, fury, revulsion, sorrow, empathy, desire, euphoria, avarice, remorse, exhilaration, humiliation, and astonishment. The C-A-B paradigm posits that cognition (C) is the primary determinant of emotion (A), which then impacts behavior (B) (Nicosia, 1966). The CAB theory has been employed to investigate green consumption behaviors, as consumers' emotive responses to environmental issues and their attitudes substantially influence their intention to purchase environmentally friendly products (Chan & Lau, 2000). There was no investigation of CAB theory in the context of the fashion industry. Emotion is the essential connection in the consumer experience according to CAB theory (Holbrook & Batra, 1987). Affective components are determined by the emotional experiences of individuals or the preferences of customers (Derbaix & Pham, 1991). Positive (e.g., pleasure) and negative (e.g., anger) emotional effects on products can result from positive and negative experiences with the product or service characteristics (Westbrook, 1987).

The purpose of this investigation is hence threefold. First, through the Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral (C-A-B) conceptual model, this study aims to describe how U.S. Gen Z consumers

intend to buy fast fashion garments when they are exposed to promotional activities imbued with greenwashing features. In other words, how greenwashing as a cognitive element effects the green purchase intention of U.S. fast fashion consumer through green skepticism, perceived betrayal, green perceived risk, green trust, and perceived benefit. Secondly, how does emotion become the vital link in the preference of their consumption experience. Thirdly, what features of a fast fashion brand promotional activities dictate their purchase intention. This research is the first attempt to examine the greenwashing phenomena of fast fashion brands through the C-A-B theory. Therefore, it aims to extend greenwashing literature by understanding the paradoxical consumption behavior of fashion consumption of Gen Z. The findings of this study are anticipated to elucidate U.S. Gen Z fast fashion customers' purchasing intents, therefore assisting policymakers to curb fast fashion brand greenwashing phenomena.

Research Method: The researchers administered an online survey using a standardized questionnaire. Data were collected through Amazon Mturk and consumers aged between 18-26 in the USA were targeted. After data cleaning, a total of 345 valid responses were generated for data analysis. Measurement scale for 5-items of greenwashing (GW) (Chen & Chang, 2012), 4-items of green purchase intention (GPI) (Lu et al., 2022), 4-items of green skepticism (GS) (Nguyen et al., 2019), 5-items of green trust (GT) (Chen & Chai, 2010), 4-items of green perceived risk (GPR) (Chen & Chang, 2012), 6-items of perceived benefit (FPR) (Braga et al., 2019), and 4-items of perceived betrayal (PB) (Sun & Shi, 2022) adopted from previous research. Before answering the survey question of six-point Likert scale, participant was exposed three unique promotional messages of brand name "Solo" (pseudonym). The construction of manipulation techniques in the creation of promotional messages for fast fashion brands is derived from existing literature and modified to align with the specific objectives of the research.

Results: Two-step, structural equation modeling was implemented to test the hypothesis. Furthermore, 5000 bootstrapping was employed for indirect and moderating effect analysis. A confirmatory factor analysis was first employed to assess the measurement model from the outset. Cronbach alpha was greater than 0.70 of all the variables, meeting the acceptable limit. There were acceptable correlations among constructs. In convergent validity, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) for each variable were greater than 0.5 and 0.7, respectively, meeting the acceptance criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The fit indices that demonstrate a satisfactory fit of the measurement model: $\chi^2_{(df=443)} = 1016.808$, $p < 0.0001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.29$; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.03; CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.93. The fit indices exhibited values that met the frequently recommended cutoff values per the stringent conventional standards (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Then, SEM analysis results revealed a closer to acceptable model fit ($\chi^2_{(df=454)} = 1403.280$, $p < 0.0001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.0$; RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.90; TLI = 0.89; SRMR = 0.06).

The statistics results indicated that greenwashing phenomena significantly impact green skepticism ($\beta=0.844$, $p<0.001$), perceived betrayal ($\beta=1.011$, $p<0.001$), green perceived risk ($\beta=0.981$, $p<0.001$), green trust ($\beta=0.807$, $p<0.001$), and perceived benefit ($\beta=0.737$, $p<0.001$). In addition, the results also pointed out that green purchase intention was significantly positively associated with green skepticism ($\beta=0.403$, $p<0.001$), perceived betrayal ($\beta=0.135$, $p<0.05$), green trust ($\beta=0.451$, $p<0.001$), and perceived benefit ($\beta=0.373$, $p<0.001$); and was negatively influenced by green perceived risk ($\beta=-0.289$, $p<0.01$). This study examined the activation of the indirect effect of greenwash on green purchase intentions through a mediating variable (green skepticism,

perceived betrayal, green perceived risk, green trust, perceived benefit). The bootstrap test revealed that all the mediating variables unstandardized co-efficient met the lower and upper-level 95% confidence interval threshold. The results show that the coefficient of the interaction term (gender and greenwashing) with green trust was statistically significant ($\beta=-0.503$, $p<0.01$). The results support H11e, demonstrating a significant correlation ($\beta=-0.452$, $p<0.001$) between the perceived benefit, and the interaction of gender and greenwashing. The rate of change is greater among males than females.

Discussion: No prior study had been conducted to gather Gen Z's response to fast fashion brand promotional greenwashing phenomena through the C-A-B theory. Contrary to conventional wisdom and studies on greenwashing research (Aji & Sutikno, 2015; Akturan, 2018; Chen & Chang, 2013; Lu et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2019; Promalessy & Handriana, 2024; Sun & Shi, 2022), our research provides three major theoretical contributions to the existing greenwashing literature. Our first theoretical contribution to the greenwashing research was that Gen Z consumers had both positive and negative affective responses regarding fast fashion brand greenwashing claims. Feeling skeptical and betrayed about the greenwashing claim did not hold them back from buying the product. Part of the reason behind this unexpected buying intention may be their unconcern about the environment. Furthermore, when greenwashing claims are imbued with product benefits with clever strategy and matched with the characteristics of certain generation needs, then the perception of positive affective response outweighs the negative to buy the green product. This explains the paradoxical consumption behavior (Herron, 2023) of Gen Z consumers.

In addition, Gen Z has a lack of ability to understand and evaluate the greenwashing claims properly. This was further confirmed by the participant's significant positive relation with green trust and the highest weighted unstandardized coefficient between green trust and green purchase intention compared with all the other affective element responses to green purchase intention. Our final theoretical contribution to the greenwashing literature was that despite Gen Z's inclination to buy fast fashion garments, they have image concerns and are concerned about the product's environmental performance in the future. These phenomena confirm the positive relationship between greenwashing and green perceived risk. Furthermore, only green perceived risk negatively correlates with green purchase intention among all affective responses. Overall study explains why fast fashion brands remain a major market (Estrada, 2024; Smith, 2023) despite being imbued with greenwashing phenomena (Munir & Mohan, 2022) and Gen Z remains a major consumer (Estrada, 2024; Wojdyla & Chi, 2024; Zimand-Sheiner & Lissitsa, 2024).

Conclusion: The purpose of this study is to describe, using the C-A-B theory, how Gen Z consumers in the United States make purchasing decisions when exposed to the promotional claims of fast fashion brands. The study's findings suggested that the perception of a positive affective response outweighs the negative in favor of purchasing the green product when greenwashing claims are infused with product benefits through a creative strategy. This explains the paradoxical consumption behavior of Gen Z, and elaborates the reason why fast fashion brands continue to be a significant market, despite the fact that they are associated with greenwashing. Our study has limitations. Male participants were higher than females. Only USA Gen Z citizens and fast fashion were considered. Greenwashing could cause a "Spillover effect" on consumers. Research needs to be done to test whether greenwashing phenomena from fast fashion brands could make consumers refrain from luxury brands or slow fashion brands.

Reference:

- Aji, H. M., & Sutikno, B. (2015). The extended consequence of greenwashing: Perceived consumer skepticism. *International Journal of Business and Information*, 10(4), 433-468.
- Akturan, U. (2018). How does greenwashing affect green branding equity and purchase intention? An empirical research. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 36(7), 809-824. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-12-2017-0339>
- Braga, S., Martínez, M. P., Correa, C. M., Moura-Leite, R. C., & Da Silva, D. (2019). Greenwashing effect, attitudes, and beliefs in green consumption. *RAUSP Management Journal*, 54(2), 226-241. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RAUSP-08-2018-0070>
- Chan, R. Y., & Lau, L. B. (2000). Antecedents of green purchases: a survey in China. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 17(4), 338-357. <https://doi.org/10.1108/07363760010335358>
- Chen, T. B., & Chai, L. T. (2010). Attitude towards the environment and green products: consumers' perspective. *Management Science and Engineering*, 4(2), 27.
- Chen, Y.-S., & Chang, C.-H. (2013). Greenwash and green trust: The mediation effects of green consumer confusion and green perceived risk. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 114, 489-500. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1360-0>
- Chen, Y. S., & Chang, C. H. (2012). Enhance green purchase intentions: The roles of green perceived value, green perceived risk, and green trust. *Management Decision*, 50(3), 502-520. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251741211216250>
- Derbaix, C., & Pham, M. T. (1991). Affective reactions to consumption situations: A pilot investigation. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 12(2), 325-355. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-4870\(91\)90019-P](https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-4870(91)90019-P)
- Desmet, P. M. (2012). Faces of product pleasure: 25 positive emotions in human-product interactions. *International Journal of Design*, 6(2), 1-29.
- Dimock, M. (2019). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. *Pew Research Center*, 17(1), 1-7.
- Estrada, M. (2024). *Meet the Gen Z-ers slowing down fast fashion by promoting sustainable clothing*. nbcсандiego. Retrieved April 23 from <https://www.nbcсандiego.com/news/national-international/gen-z-ers-fast-fashion-sustainable-clothing/3495333/#:~:text=24/7%20San%20Diego%20news.end%20up%20in%20a%20andfill>.
- Frijda, N. H., Kuipers, P., & Ter Schure, E. (1989). Relations among emotion, appraisal, and emotional action readiness. *JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY*, 57(2), 212-228.
- Herron, A. (2023). *The intention gap: when buying and beliefs don't match*. FASHION DIVE. <https://www.fashiondive.com/news/sustainable-fashion-consumer-demographics-gen-z/650864/>
- Holbrook, M. B., & Batra, R. (1987). Assessing the role of emotions as mediators of consumer responses to advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(3), 404-420. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209123>