



Generation Z and Socially Responsible Fashion Consumption: Exploring the Value-Action Gap

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According to recent studies, Generation Z (Gen Z) ranks climate change, income inequality and poverty to be top causes for concern (Broadbent, Gougoulis, Lui, Pota, & Simons, 2017; Masdar, 2016) and believes businesses have a social and environmental responsibility to address such challenges (Cheung, Glass, McCarty & Wong, 2017; Cone Communications, 2017). Despite these concerns, younger consumers, specifically those between the ages of 15 and 29, are the most frequent consumers of fast fashion items (Gupta & Gentry, 2018), an industry known to contribute directly to the above problems. For example, the fast fashion industry has been associated with the depletion of water resources, the pollution of freshwater streams, and low employee wages (Gupta & Gentry, 2018; James & Montgomery, 2017).

Given the relatively negative impact created by fast fashion, how do Gen Z consumers reconcile concern for the environment and interest in social responsibility with fast fashion consumption? Prior research has noted the many barriers to socially responsible fashion consumption (SRFC), including price (Eckhardt, Belk & Devinney, 2010), scarce options (Connell, 2010; James & Montgomery, 2017), convenience (Francis & Davis, 2015), cynicism (James & Montgomery, 2017), its unfashionable nature and lack of quality (Connell, 2010), and uncomfortable materials (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Research on young consumers and SRFC has focused on barriers to sustainable consumption as well as the disposal habits of adolescents (Francis & Davis, 2015). For example, Morgan and Birtwistle (2009) found that young consumers lack knowledge regarding the production of apparel. They indicate that if harmful production practices were communicated to these consumers, their consumption habits might change. Prior research on Gen Z has focused on the characteristics and consumption habits of this generation in general (Cheung et al., 2017; Vision Critical, 2016), as well as their concerns for sustainability and support for corporate social responsibility (First Insight, 2020; Masdar, 2016). Yet, there is little research that addresses the extent to which matters of sustainability enter into the apparel consumption decisions among members of the Gen Z cohort. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the difference, if any, between what members of this cohort personally believe and what they do relative to these beliefs. In environmental education, this difference is known as the “value-action gap” (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Specific focus was placed on understanding their consumption decisions across the apparel consumption cycle, from acquisition to use and disposal (Winakor, 1969).

Primary qualitative data were collected by recruiting a diverse sample of adolescents from a southeastern suburban high school in the spring of 2019. With IRB approval from the researchers' university, a total of 41 members of Gen Z (20 males and 21 females) ranging in age from 15 to 18 and representing Asian, Hispanic, African-American and Caucasian races participated in a total of seven focus groups. Questions focused on participants' apparel consumption decisions, knowledge and awareness of issues raised about sustainability, and to what extent these matters played a role in their consumption cycle decisions. Focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were then analyzed iteratively to identify consistent meanings present across the data (Hodges, 2011). Three emergent themes were identified and used to structure the interpretation: *Unintentionally Sustainable, A Knowledge Conundrum, and Perceived Barriers*.

While participants professed to be concerned about the environment and social equality, this value did not seem to always translate directly to their acts of apparel consumption. That is, aside from not wanting to be wasteful, sustainability was not cited as a primary factor that affected their apparel acquisition decisions, in that participants "...would like to say it matters, but like when I'm buying clothes I definitely don't really like think about that" (Kay, Female, 18). Interestingly, participants revealed that they do engage in SRFC sometimes, albeit unintentionally. For instance, participants talked about acquiring clothing through clothing swaps, renting clothing, and shopping second hand either by visiting second hand stores or by buying second hand clothing via Instagram closet accounts. However, doing so allows them to find clothing that's "...really cheap and...interesting" (Kay, Female, 18), and not necessarily because it is less wasteful or more sustainable. In an interesting contrast, for the use stage of apparel consumption, participants discussed wearing their clothing for as long as possible and discontinuing its use only when it is too small, it no longer reflects their style, or is too worn out. For the disposal stage, participants were hesitant to simply throw away clothing, and instead preferred to donate it to family and friends, thrift shops or charity organizations, or to upcycle it in some manner because "...there's no point in wasting it" (LJ, Male, 16).

Many participants noted that they were aware of the unsustainable nature of apparel production to the extent "...that like there's child labor, that like often goes into like a t-shirt that's being made..." (Trevor, Male, 17), but this knowledge does not generally affect consumption as "...no one like goes out of their way to try and change the way it is..." (Lekobe, Male, 18), an issue that is illustrative of the value-action gap. However, a kind of knowledge conundrum also emerged, as many participants expressed that, should unsustainable or harmful production practices be made more transparent, then they would not consider purchasing apparel produced by such means. As Juan (Male, 16) stated "...if I knew...some store was like, not environmentally friendly or like just treat[ed] the workers bad ...I would generally not buy from there." This response reflects the idea proposed by Morgan and Birtwistle (2009), as it demonstrates how some Gen Z consumers are willing to change their behaviors to avoid supporting stores and/or brands if they learn that the clothing was produced using child labor, by mistreating workers or by harming the environment. Although some participants want clothing "...to be sustainable...there aren't many options" (Steve, Male, 18). Clearly, participants like

Steve perceive barriers preventing them from engaging in SRFC. This issue is similar to findings of prior research (Francis & Davis, 2015; James & Montgomery, 2017), however, unlike some previous studies (Connell, 2010; McNeill & Moore, 2015), other perceived barriers, such as lacking in style, quality, or comfortable material, were not cited by participants. Ultimately, while participants indicated that they care about social and environmental responsibility, a value that has been identified as characteristic of the Gen Z generation (Cone, 2017; Masdar, 2016), it did not always play a role in their actions. This finding supports the notion of the value-action gap (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002) in apparel consumption behaviors among this cohort.

This study focused on SRFC behaviors among an increasingly important consumer cohort, Gen Z. Findings of this study offer insight into how members of Gen Z make apparel consumption decisions, specifically in terms of apparel acquisition, use, and disposal (Winakor, 1969) and their general views on SRFC. Although participants were aware of the need to be responsible when using and disposing of clothing, in terms of SRFC, acquisition seemed to pose the biggest challenge, due to a lack of information and transparency on the part of apparel producers and retailers. Given the exploratory nature of this study, future research is needed to better understand the types of communication required for members of Gen Z to be more aware of the implications of fast fashion consumption and, in turn, to more fully participate in sustainable acquisition behaviors.

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