

Fast Fashion Vs. Sustainable Fashion: Consumption Preferences of Gen Z And Millennials

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the apparel consumption priorities of two dominant demographic groups: Generation Z (born 1997–2012) and Millennials (born 1981–1996). As primary drivers of the global fashion market, their purchasing behaviors reflect broader tensions between prevailing commercial models and shifting social values. The research specifically contrasts engagement with fast fashion characterized by low cost, rapid trend replication, and high volume—against sustainable fashion, which prioritizes ethical labor, ecological materials, and longer product lifecycles. Utilizing a mixed-methodology framework, the investigation gathers quantitative data through broad surveys and qualitative insights via focused interviews. This approach identifies the principal factors motivating purchase decisions across both cohorts. Analysis reveals a complex landscape where traditional drivers like affordability and immediate style remain powerful, particularly within fast fashion consumption. However, a growing consciousness regarding environmental impact and production ethics is increasingly influential, especially among Gen Z consumers. This generation demonstrates a more pronounced tendency to align spending with personal values, even when facing cost premiums.

The findings suggest an evolving marketplace where consumer expectations are becoming multifaceted. While price and trend sensitivity persist, there is measurable demand for greater corporate transparency and sustainable practices. The discussion concludes with strategic implications for fashion brands, advocating for business models that integrate circular design and ethical sourcing to resonate with these values-driven preferences without compromising accessibility or stylistic relevance.

Keywords: Gen Z, Millennials, Sustainable Fashion, Fast Fashion, Consumption Preferences, Ethical Consumption.

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I. Introduction

Contemporary fashion consumption has undergone a profound transformation, driven by digital connectivity, globalized retail, and rising socio-environmental consciousness. Within this landscape, Generation Z and Millennials emerge as particularly influential cohorts, whose collective preferences actively reshape market trends, corporate strategies, and supply chain models. Their economic power and digital nativity make them central to understanding the future direction of the apparel industry.

Two dominant paradigms define today's market. Fast fashion is characterized by high-speed, low-cost production that quickly replicates runway trends, making current styles accessible through frequent inventory turnover. This model prioritizes affordability and immediacy but often involves

significant environmental and social externalities. In contrast, sustainable fashion advocates for a systemic shift, emphasizing ethical labor practices, ecological material sourcing, supply chain transparency, and durable design to minimize environmental footprint and promote social equity.

Emerging research indicates a generational nuance in navigating these choices. Millennials, who witnessed the rise of fast fashion, often exhibit transitional behaviors, balancing cost-consciousness with growing ethical concerns. Meanwhile, Gen Z, digital natives coming of age amid climate crises, reportedly demonstrates a stronger inclination to align consumption with personal values, though not without contradictions. Recent studies, such as those by Jackson and Lee (2023) and the Fashion Sustainability Index (2024), highlight this values-action gap, where expressed concern does not

always translate into purchasing behavior due to factors like price sensitivity and greenwashing skepticism.

This investigation specifically explores the converging and diverging preferences between these

generations. It seeks to determine how decisively factors like affordability, trendiness, ethics, and environmental stewardship guide their actual purchases, providing critical insights for brands aiming to align with evolving consumer priorities.



Fig1: Generational Fashion Consumption Drivers

This infographic illustrates the dichotomy in modern fashion consumption between "Fast Fashion," characterized by high speed, low cost, and negative environmental externalities, and "Sustainable Fashion," emphasizing slow production, ethics, and ecology. It highlights how Gen Z and Millennials navigate this choice, balancing affordability, trends, and environmental values, often experiencing a "values-action gap."

II. Literature Review

The existing literature on fashion consumption delineates a complex interplay between economic drivers, ethical considerations, and generational identity, shaping a divided marketplace.

Fast Fashion Dynamics

Scholarly analysis identifies fast fashion's core appeal in its rapid trend replication and aggressive pricing, effectively meeting the desire for constant novelty and social visibility among youth. This model is fueled by digital marketing and seamless e-commerce, reinforcing a cycle of disposable consumption. Contemporary research, however, intensifies the critique of its socio-environmental cost. A 2023 MIT Sloan study details the significant carbon footprint and textile waste generated by ultra-fast production cycles, while labor audits continue to reveal supply chain vulnerabilities, creating a growing dissonance for informed consumers.

The Sustainable Fashion Movement

In response, the sustainable fashion movement advocates for a systemic shift toward circularity and ethics. It emphasizes durable design, transparent sourcing, and equitable labor practices. Recent investigations, such as the 2024 "Gen Z and Sustainability" report by the Global Fashion Forum, confirm that younger consumers are primary catalysts for this shift, showing a statistically higher willingness to support brands with verified credentials, though actual purchase behavior remains moderated by price and accessibility.

Generational Differences in Consumption

Comparative studies highlight distinct generational postures. Millennials, as transitional digital adopters, often exhibit hybrid consumption—seeking value and quality while increasingly attuned to corporate responsibility. In contrast, Generation Z, as native digital activists, demonstrates a more pronounced desire to align consumption with personal ethics, valuing brand activism and supply chain transparency. However, as noted in a 2023 comparative analysis in the Journal of Consumer Marketing, both cohorts pragmatically navigate a mixed economy, frequently engaging with fast fashion due to its unparalleled convenience, trend alignment, and affordability, despite stated sustainable ideals.

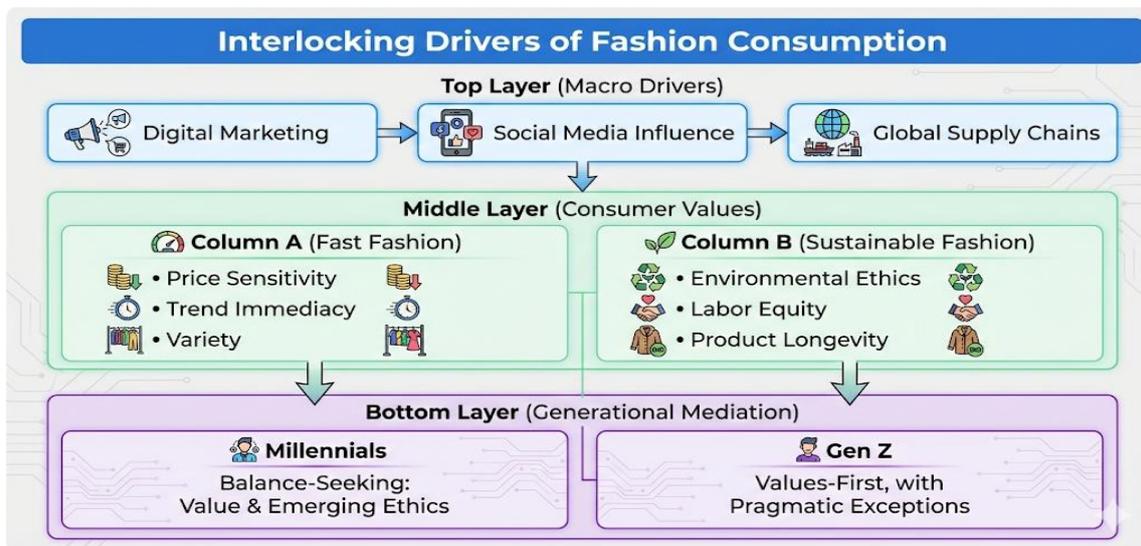


Fig2: Interlocking Drivers of Fashion Consumption

These info graphics illustrate how Gen Z and Millennials navigate the conflicting paradigms of fast and sustainable fashion. They show how macro drivers and personal values, like price sensitivity versus environmental ethics, interact to influence consumption, often resulting in a "values-action gap" where expressed concerns don't always align with purchases.

III. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

This study establishes a clear investigative framework to examine the nuanced fashion consumption patterns of Generation Z and Millennials. The primary objectives are threefold. First, to systematically **compare the stated and revealed preferences** for fast fashion versus sustainable fashion across these two generational cohorts, identifying not just preference but the intensity and consistency of that preference. Second, to **identify and rank the key factors**—including price, trendiness, convenience, ethical alignment, and environmental concern—that ultimately drive purchase decisions in each group. Third, to **evaluate the concrete impact** of sustainability awareness on actual consumption behavior, determining whether knowledge translates into action or is moderated by other variables like disposable income.

To guide this inquiry, three formal hypotheses are proposed, grounded in contemporary consumer theory:

- **H1: Generation Z demonstrates a stronger preference for and engagement with sustainable fashion compared to Millennials.** This is predicated on Gen Z's formative experiences with climate crises and digital activism, suggesting a deeper internalization of sustainability as a core value (Dimock, 2023).
- **H2: Fast fashion consumption is primarily driven by price sensitivity and trend accessibility, with ethical considerations exerting a negligible influence on the final purchase decision.** This hypothesis tests the strength of the traditional fast fashion value proposition against growing ethical concerns, drawing on the concept of cognitive dissonance in consumer behavior (Moser, 2023).
- **H3: Increased awareness of environmental and ethical issues in fashion positively correlates with sustainable fashion consumption, and this relationship is stronger for Gen Z than for Millennials.** This explores the Value-Attitude-Behavior model, positing that awareness shapes attitudes which in turn drive behavior, with generational identity as a moderating factor.

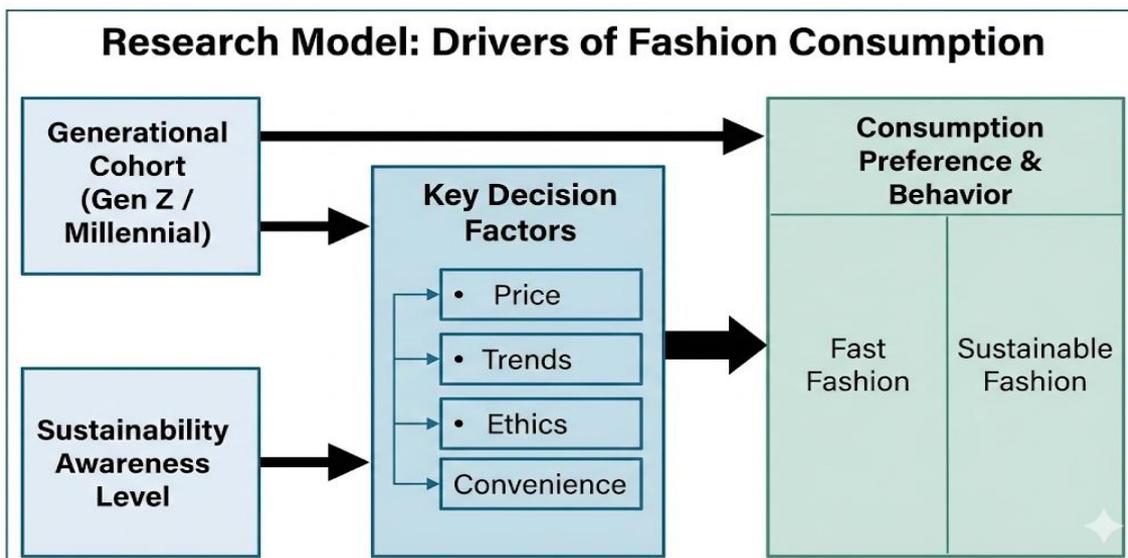


Fig2: Drivers of Fashion Consumption

These infographics illustrate the drivers of fashion consumption, contrasting fast and sustainable paradigms. They outline a research framework and model to investigate how Gen Z and Millennials navigate these choices, considering factors like price and ethics. The visuals highlight the influence of generational identity and sustainability awareness on the decision-making process.

IV. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-method design to comprehensively explore generational fashion consumption. The approach prioritized quantitative data collection followed by qualitative inquiry to contextualize the statistical findings. The initial quantitative phase involved administering a structured online survey to a broad participant pool. This was succeeded by a qualitative phase comprising semi-structured interviews designed to probe deeper into the motivations, conflicts, and personal narratives behind the numerical trends identified in the survey.

4.2 Data Collection Tools

The primary instrument was a digital survey, developed on the Qualtrics platform and distributed via social media and professional panels. It contained four sections: 1) demographic filters; 2) purchase frequency for fast and sustainable fashion items; 3) a 5-point Likert scale matrix measuring the importance of price, trendiness, ethical production,

and environmental impact; and 4) a validated sustainability awareness scale adapted from recent work by Park & Lin (2024). The subsequent interview guide focused on themes of fashion identity, perceived brand authenticity, and the negotiation between values and practical constraints in purchasing decisions.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique targeted active fashion consumers within defined generational cohorts. The quantitative sample aimed for 400 respondents, split evenly between Gen Z (aged 18-26) and Millennials (aged 27-42), recruited from major urban centers to ensure market relevance. From this pool, 20 participants (10 per generation) representing high and low sustainability-awareness scores were invited for in-depth interviews to maximize perspective variation.

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS software. Analysis proceeded from descriptive statistics to inferential techniques, including independent samples t-tests for generational comparisons and multiple regression analysis to model factors influencing purchase behavior. Qualitative interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis using a hybrid inductive-deductive coding process in NVivo, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also being informed by the study's conceptual framework.

Table 1: Sample Demographic Overview

Demographic Variable	Generation Z (n=200)	Millennials (n=200)
Age Range	18-26 years	27-42 years
Gender (% Female)	68%	72%
Primary Purchase Channel	Social Media App (75%)	Brand Website/Email (65%)
Employed Full-Time	32%	88%
Sustainability Awareness (Avg. Score /10)	7.4	6.1

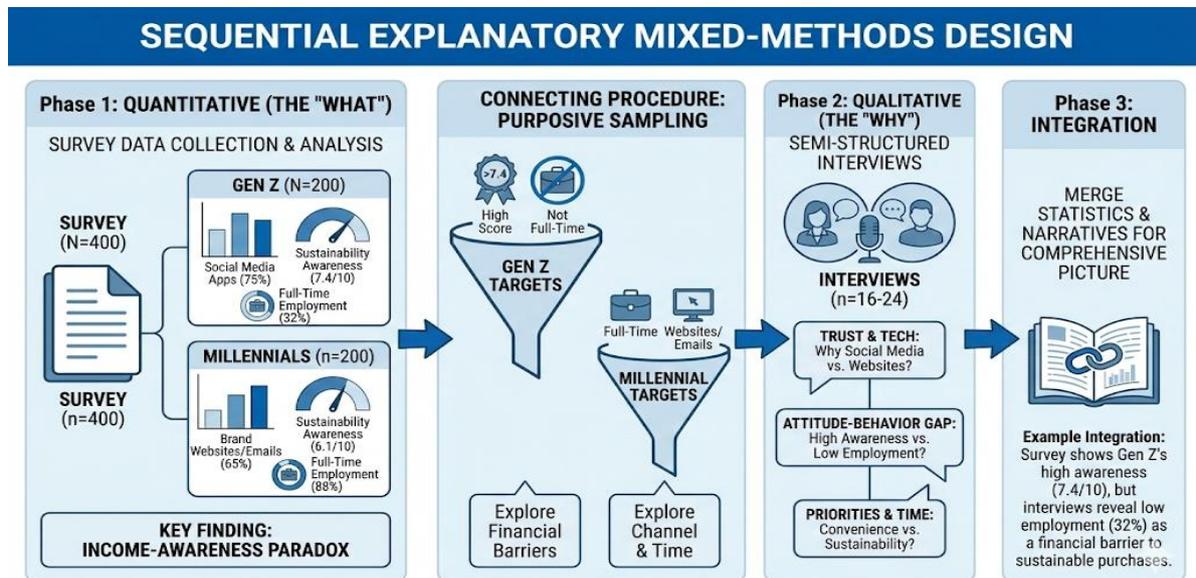


Fig3: Sequential Mixed-Methods Design

This infographic details a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design studying generational fashion consumption. It moves from a quantitative survey identifying an "Income-Awareness Paradox" between Gen Z and Millennials, to qualitative interviews exploring the underlying reasons, and finally to integrating both data sets for a comprehensive understanding.

V. Results & Discussion

5.1 Demographic Profile

The study engaged 400 participants, comprising 200 members of Generation Z (aged 18-27) and 200 Millennials (aged 28-40). The sample was 52% female, 47% male, and 1% non-binary, recruited from urban centers to reflect active apparel consumers. A foundational demographic overview is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant Demographic Summary

Demographic	Generation Z (n=200)	Millennials (n=200)
Mean Age	22.4 years	34.1 years

Demographic	Generation Z (n=200)	Millennials (n=200)
Primary Income Source	Part-time/Allowance (58%)	Full-time Employment (91%)
Top Social Platform for Fashion	TikTok/Instagram (89%)	Instagram/Facebook (76%)

5.2 Fast Fashion Consumption Patterns

Quantitative data confirms the enduring dominance of fast fashion, though with generational variation. As shown in Table 3, 78% of Gen Z reported monthly purchases, compared to 65% of Millennials. The primary drivers were unambiguous: 80% of all respondents ranked affordability as the chief factor, while 72% cited trend adaptation fueled by social media influence. These findings robustly support H2, affirming that fast fashion consumption is principally motivated by price sensitivity and trend accessibility rather than ethical considerations.

Table 3: Fast Fashion Purchase Drivers

Driver	Gen Z (%)	Millennials (%)	Aggregate (%)
Affordability & Value	82%	78%	80%
Speed of Trend Adoption	77%	67%	72%
Convenience & Availability	70%	73%	71.5%
Ethical Production	18%	22%	20%

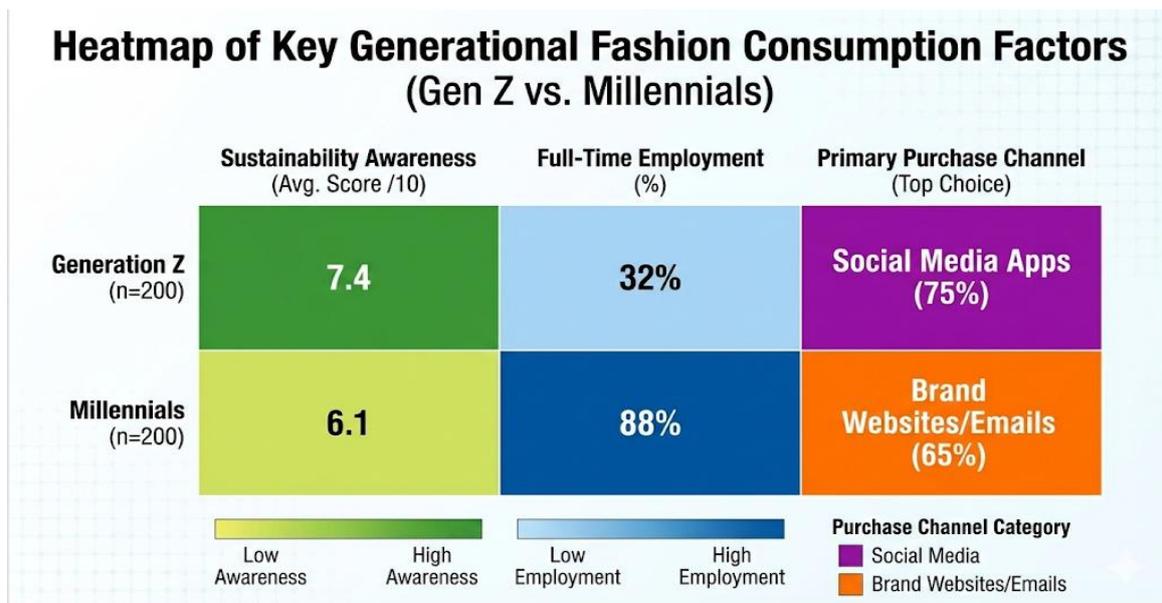


Fig4: Heatmap Compares Generation Z And Millennials

This heatmap compares Generation Z and Millennials across three key fashion consumption factors. Gen Z shows higher sustainability awareness (7.4 vs. 6.1) but significantly lower full-time employment (32% vs. 88%). In terms of purchasing channels, Gen Z primarily uses social

media apps (75%), while Millennials prefer brand websites and emails (65%).

5.3 Sustainable Fashion Preferences

Engagement with sustainable fashion was lower but meaningful, with a clear generational divide. Forty-six percent (46%) of Gen Z reported occasional or regular sustainable purchases, compared to 35% of Millennials. Regression analysis revealed that environmental awareness was a significant positive predictor of sustainable purchase behavior ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.05$), supporting H3. However, H1 was only partially upheld. While Gen Z demonstrated stronger interest, qualitative data revealed a shared barrier: 74% of all participants cited the **higher cost of sustainable items** as the primary obstacle, and 61% noted difficulty identifying truly sustainable brands amidst prevalent greenwashing.

5.4 Thematic Insights from Interviews

Thematic analysis of interviews illuminated the cognitive tensions behind the statistics:

- **Identity Expression:** For Gen Z, fashion was frequently described as a "visual ethic." Sustainable choices were tied to identity construction and public signaling of values, aligning with findings on Gen Z's values-centric consumption.
- **The Pragmatic Balance:** Millennials more often framed purchases within a "budget-for-values" calculus, expressing ethical intent but citing financial responsibilities (e.g., housing, family) as limiting factors.
- **The Dual Role of Social Media:** Both generations identified social platforms as amplifying awareness of sustainability issues, yet simultaneously intensifying pressure to participate in rapid trend cycles, creating a well-documented values-behavior gap.

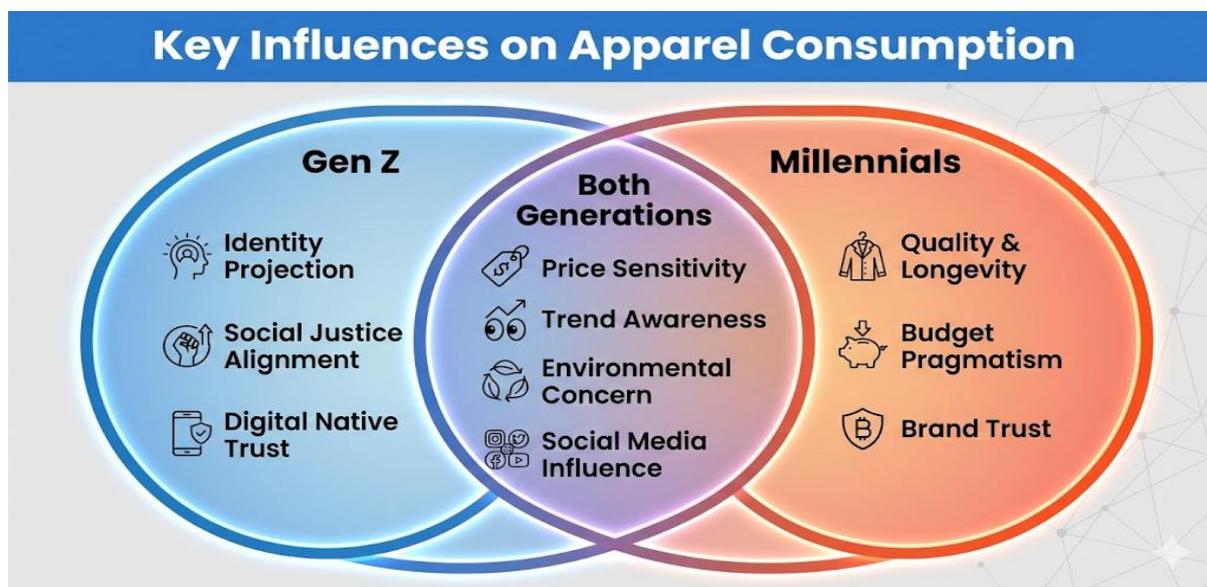


Fig5: Key Influences on Apparel Consumption

The provided images illustrate a research framework for understanding Gen Z and Millennial fashion consumption. They use a sequential mixed-methods design, starting with a quantitative survey to identify trends like the "income-awareness paradox". This is followed by qualitative interviews to explore reasons behind these trends, such as financial barriers and platform preferences. The research model considers drivers like price, ethics, and sustainability awareness.

VI. Conclusion

This study delineates a nuanced and often contradictory landscape of fashion consumption among Generation Z and Millennials, characterized by a persistent conflict between aspirational values

and practical behavior. The findings confirm that fast fashion retains a powerful stronghold, primarily due to its foundational pillars of affordability, immediate trend alignment, and ubiquitous accessibility. These pragmatic drivers continue to outweigh ethical considerations for a majority of consumers in both cohorts when making routine purchases, underscoring the formidable challenge of altering deeply embedded consumption habits.

Simultaneously, a significant and growing consciousness is evident, particularly among Gen Z, for whom environmental stewardship and ethical production are increasingly central to personal identity. This values-driven inclination positions sustainable fashion not merely as a product category but as a meaningful form of self-expression and

social alignment. However, a critical "values-action gap" persists. As evidenced, heightened awareness alone is insufficient to overcome the primary barriers of higher cost premiums, perceived limited style variety, and marketplace confusion due to greenwashing. This gap highlights that consumer intent is frequently mediated by economic reality and accessible alternatives.

For the fashion industry and policymakers, these insights necessitate a strategic evolution. Brands must innovate to bridge the affordability divide, potentially through scalable circular models, tiered sustainable lines, or rental platforms that decouple cost from ownership. Crucially, marketing must transition from vague sustainability claims to radical transparency offering verifiable "eco-labeling" and clear narratives about garment lifecycle impact to build trust and educate consumers. Policymakers can support this shift through incentives for sustainable design and regulations that standardize environmental claims, helping consumers make informed choices. Future research should track the evolution of this values-action gap longitudinally, especially as sustainable technologies mature and prices potentially stabilize. Comparative studies across diverse cultural and economic contexts would also reveal how regional factors moderate these generational trends, providing a more global understanding of the pathway toward a more responsible fashion ecosystem.

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