

# “IS GREEN IN FASHION?” ANALYSING THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION OF FASHION BRANDS AND THE ATTITUDES OF GENERATION Z CONSUMERS TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with “green fashion” in marketing. Young people are interested in eco production and are seeking “eco” brands, at least that's how they declare it. Fashion brands want to fulfil the wishes of their customers. But there is still one question: are companies’ promises and statements true or is it only marketing and greenwashing? We have tested their sustainability reports and statements here involves.

The main goal of the paper is to evaluate whether the environmental discourse is having an effect on young consumers (young people from generation Z) and whether they behave ecologically or not. Additionally, we are interested in getting to know the customers’ attitudes towards “green fashion”.

This study involves two analyses (both critical discourse analysis): (1) the environmental discourse of leading European fashion brands and (2) interviews with young consumers on their attitudes to, and buying behaviour of, fashion.

Additionally, there also are implications for the fashion industry.

**Keywords:** *sustainability, fashion, corporate communication, greenwashing, critical discourse analysis*

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent societal calling for climate change actions, the problems have often been visualized by plastic waste in oceans, and companies like Starbucks have been lynched for using plastic straws. Eventually, this public backlash led to changes in the directive of the European Union, banning single-use plastics. However, when we look at the biggest contributors to environmental pollution, we cannot disregard the fashion industry, which ranks among the most polluting industries in the world. “The question of fashion is not a fashionable one among intellectuals,” writes Gilles Lipovetsky, who has conceptualized the cultural and

social aspects of fashion [1]. The fashion industry has been perceived in a positive light due to its contribution to diminishing social inequalities by “democratization” – fashion companies have been praised for bringing upscale fashion trends to the masses at an affordable price after they appeared on the runway of famous designers [1]. Over the past few years, criticism aimed at the fashion industry has changed from focusing on its representing snobbism, representing “class ambition” [1] or manufacturing their fashionable products under inhuman conditions of sweatshops [2]. Instead, the focus is now on the actions which breach the common idea of sustainability or environmentally friendly acts, such as Burberry or H&M burning their unsold inventory. In the case of fashion, we can see that defining the “public interest” or “common good” can be very difficult – what can be perceived as democratization and increase of quality of life among some consumers, can be viewed, not necessarily as an opposite, but as unsustainable and environmentally harmful by others.

In order to keep up with the latest consumer trends, which show increasing interest towards environmental impact and sustainability among Millennial and Generation Z consumers, fashion brands have turned their attention towards “green marketing” [3]. Recently, many fashion brands have included sustainability and environmental issues in their communications and actions and this issue is widely reported also in academic literature [4]. Some fashion brands are also trying to direct consumer behaviour towards more ethical and environmentally-friendly consumption, such as slow-fashion or recycling [5]. But from the standpoint of strategic communication of fashion brands, which derive their success from continuous economic growth – is it merely just to do the talking, or does it really change the behaviour of consumers? What effect does emphasising the environmental issues in the communication of fashion brands have on the consumers? Can communicating slow fashion really lead towards system change, as proposed by Fletcher [5], or is it an oxymoron?

It is not only the fashion brands talking about the environment, but the stakeholders who also play an important role in the dialogue between fashion brands and their consumers. The role of public relations in the fashion industry is evolving and it is trying to enhance consumer-citizen behaviour and social change by promoting the ideas of environmentally conscious behaviour [6].

However, we are still just beginning to learn about the corporate-consumer relationship and the role of the stakeholder's power when it comes to possible system change. Existing research shows that the consumer backlash against companies who do not fulfil often vaguely defined public interest, ranges from passive clicktivism or slacktivism, to advocacy campaigns which can affect the whole industry. It is essential to explore the role of public relations in this process – to what extent should public relations contribute to the company’s success on the market and listen to the voices of the stakeholders [7]? To what extent should the companies take over the political stand, and yet not become politicized or even

propagandistic by displaying vague statements and pretending their public interest, as in Vaclav Havel's absurd dramas [7]?

Our aim is to explore the attitudes towards fashion consumption with regard to environmental issues among Generation Z consumers – the younger generation, whose behavioural patterns will strongly influence environmental development around the globe in the future.

## **METHOD AND METHODOLOGY**

The main goal is to explore the customers' and companies' attitudes towards the broadly defined "environmental issues" which are part of the larger picture of contribution to the common good by the fashion brands and corporations, and how this topic is perceived by consumers. Additionally, we will consider the extent to which this topic is perceived and in which way they relate to each other. Our aim is also to analyse what the "social beliefs" which are reinforced by companies or consumers [8], see Fig. 1.

There were analysed two aspects of this rather complex issue in this paper. That means the research is divided into two parts (two phases).

Firstly, the environmental discourse in the communication of leading European fashion brands, were tested. We have chosen leading fashion brands because their products are available in most countries in Europe; therefore, they impact our society and are well known among young people from generation Z.

Secondly, a qualitative study among respondents in generation Z (born after 1995) about their perceptions, attitudes and buying behaviour when it comes to fashion was conducted (following exploratory studies by Watson and Yan [11])

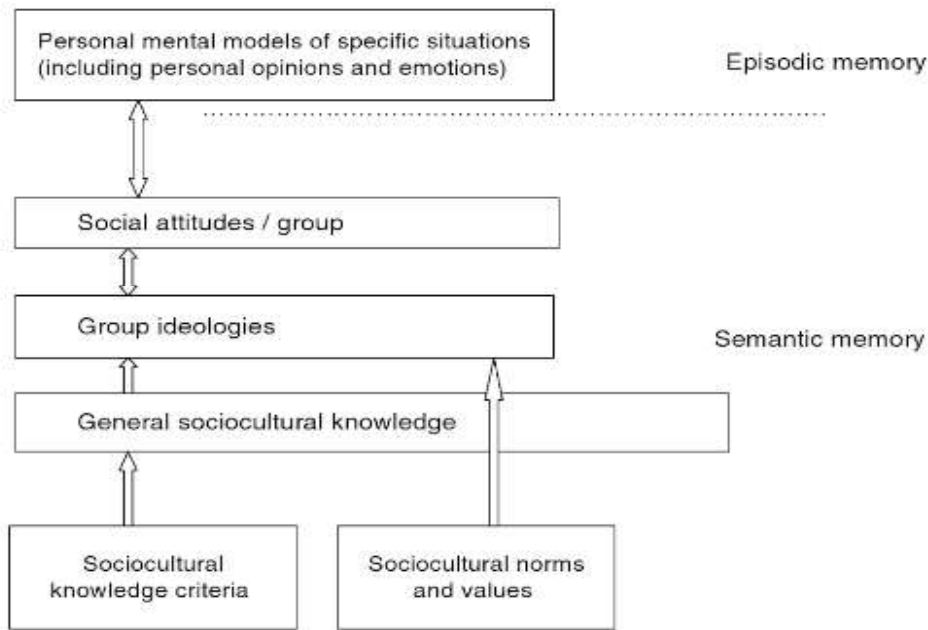
Finally, the first and second analyses were compared to ascertain whether the two discourses related to each other, or if they are somehow intertwined or rather separated. It is extremely difficult to make conclusions as to whether there is some effect on environmental communication of fashion brands towards the consumers – the results cannot prove an effect of communication on consumers, but they can show some indications of effects or they can also show the disparities and discrepancies of what brands and consumers perceive as "sustainable" and "ethical".

Our research is therefore divided into two parts with one research question being asked for each part.

RQ1: How are environmental issues defined from the perspectives of fashion brands? (*for part 1*)

RQ2. How are environmental issues defined from the perspectives of young consumers? *(for part 2)*

We use the CDA as developed by Teun van Dijk [8] for our research. Van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach enables the analysis of ideological, power and societal structures, which are deeply embedded in the text. CDA is an effective tool to uncover hidden structures of communicative power, and it also allows us to ask not only what is being said, but also what is missing in the conversation. “Knowledge and attitudes, together with their ideologies, are all forms of shared cognition. Yet, they are also different” [8].



**Fig. 1.** System of social beliefs according to van Dijk [8]

**Part 1**

*Main characteristics of dataset of part 2:*

There were 28 men and 59 women in the survey (detail in table 1)

**Table 1.** Gender representation in research

gender/age	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
women	0	3	5	18	14	12	6	1	1	1
men	1	1	3	4	9	3	5	0	0	0

*Source: own research*

60 respondents spent 0-40 EUR per month on fashion, 10 respondents spent less than 120 EUR and the rest (27 respondents) spent 160 or more EUR per month. 1 man declared that he spent approximately 1600 EUR/month on fashion.

## RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The results are divided into two parts.

### Part 1

*RQ1 = How are environmental issues defined from the perspectives of fashion brands?*

Fashion brands communicate with customers through different campaigns. Moreover, these brands communicate through their actions which are summarized in annual and other types of reports available online. That is why we have focused on annual reports of sustainability.

Firstly, we have tested the companies' views and approaches towards the well-known concept of the 3R's of ethical consumption/production: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

1. **Reduce:** Brands are focused on reducing electrical energy (Inditex, Burberry, H&M as well as Adidas), water (eg. Adidas combines water consumption reduction with reuse [12]) and chemicals, eventually replacing chemical pesticide or plastic packaging material. We also often see efforts in the reduction of carbon emissions (Inditex has taken many steps towards decreasing greenhouse gas as well as emissions [15], Burberry is trying to increase carbon emissions [13]). E.G. Burberry's report "Responsibility Reflection Report" mentions all of these efforts. The most information is provided about reducing electrical energy by changing LED lighting (e.g. Burberry saved 33% of energy in five main distribution centres since 2012 [13]). Some interesting information is given in the Adidas report: Adidas will strive to reduce the environmental footprint of their consumer event [12].

2. **Waste Recycling:** According to the reports, the main point of recycling is to recycle waste, primarily the waste from stores. Burberry's aim is to recycle the textile, e.g. in Italy or in the UK [13]. In the UK they work with Avena Environmental and the John Cotton Group to recycle damaged garments into insulation materials [13]. But for the Inditex group recycling has a higher priority [15]. Mentioned in its report are the amounts of products recovered to be sent for recycling (more than 18 000 000 kilos in 2017). Adidas, as one of the firms examined, looks at recycling issues from another point of view. Adidas puts emphasis on the use of recycled materials in their production – one of its targets is increasing the use of recycled polyester in their products. In addition to this, they try to identify innovative recyclable materials that can be broken down into 3-D shapeable material [12].

3. **Reusing is not a primary priority for companies:** As can be seen, the companies aren't actively engaged in reusing. They only sort waste that can be

reused (e.g. Burberry). Adidas and H&M declares reuse of plastic waste - although they declare the reuse of plastic waste, there isn't any evidence that supports it. Inditex group doesn't publish any information about reusing [12, 14]. Unfortunately, it isn't clear, what has happened with these garments.

### **Greenwashing sins in communication of fashion brands**

Brands base their communication on strategies which are related to their mission and vision. The way they have chosen to communicate could induce spreading of positive consumer behavior and corporate behaviour [6] as well as inducing positive consumer behavior and the communication of social change. The brands which were analysed are the most likely to undertake the last direction. The way they communicate often includes features of the Seven sins of greenwashing. The Sins are: The Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off, The Sin of No Proof, The Sin of Vagueness, The Sin of Worshiping False Labels, The Sin of Irrelevance, The Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils, The Sin of Fibbing.

Most often we encounter claims that are in line with the following sins: The Sin of Irrelevance, Vagueness or The Lesser of Two Evils.

### **Part 2**

*RQ2 = How do young consumers perceive key ethical and environmental issues in the fashion industry?*

The collected data from the interviews were examined using critical discourse analysis. We have created clusters using a general inductive approach for qualitative content analysis via selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

### **Reuse, recycle, but still not reduce; defining a consumer approach to environmentally friendly fashion consumption**

We have examined the consumer's definition and approach towards the well-known concept of the 3R's of ethical consumption: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. We have found that the definitions of environmentally friendly fashion consumption are perceived by the consumers mostly in the concept of recycling and upcycling.

1. **Recycling** is the epitome of an environmental approach in the perceptions of young people. The respondents often stated that they "never throw away clothes", they "think that throwing away of too many clothes is the biggest problem" (in the fashion industry). However they state that this is not their problem: they "only throw away things which can't be worn again, because they are washed-down or torn", or "I store the thing I don't need in my closet and then throw them in the bin for clothes". Some consumers are trying to find a "common sense" balance between the fast fashion and slow fashion approach: "I'm not the

type which would throw away clothes after three months. On the other hand, I don't buy it to last for ten years”.

2. **Second-hand shopping and selling** – reusing clothes is popular among Gen Z. Respondents say that despite the fact that some of them are aware they might be buying too many clothes, some of them solve this “problem” by purchasing them in second-hand shops, which they perceive as ethical, ecological and also cheaper. “I think shopping in second-hands or upcycling is a form of sustainability” (R60). Some have also admitted that they buy more impulsively in second-hand shops because of these factors. However, their attitudes towards buying in second-hand shops differ as some would like to embed them in shopping malls while others don't like them because shopping is too time-consuming. Since most of the respondents were students, some have also noted they perceive second-hands as a typical student attire and an easy solution for low-budgets.

3. **Not reducing consumption.** There is no direct link between environmental attitude and reducing consumption. Respondents have stated they like buying “high quality goods which last longer”, or “aiming for an effective closet”.

They often state that the responsibility is out of their reach: “I care about the source (country of origin) and about the effect (on the environment), but unfortunately I cannot do anything about it. (...) I try to repair things which are broken instead of throwing it away.” (R23)

Interestingly, decreasing consumption and a more sustainable approach in buying is often linked to higher income and social status. In the answers of respondents, we found a discrepancy: those who declare lower income, usually have fewer things in their closet, take care of them and do not perceive themselves as “ecological” because they use the clothes until they are worn out and then throw them away or use them for cleaning. Those who declare higher income do perceive themselves as ecological because they “give things away” to the textile bins, to their relatives, to their co-workers, or they sell them online or swap (change clothes at special events). The data set included a respondent who declared she has a 4,5-meter-long walk-in closet, yet she perceived herself as a conscious consumer because she “recycles”. Some respondents have stated an interesting mental vision that they will be more ecological when they have more money.

### **Important findings**

#### *Fast fashion: McDonald's for everyone*

Fast fashion brands are the most widely consumed brands among Gen Z respondents in our data set. They are not perceived as inherently un-ecological or environmentally unfriendly companies. For example, one respondent stated he

“cares for the quality, not the brand”, shopping mainly in Zara or Patagonia, putting both brands on the same level. Fast fashion companies are “*producing fashion affordable for everyone – something like McDonald's. It might not be the best, but it tastes good*” (R25).

#### *No environmental backlash towards online shops*

Generally, young people are the most open to online shopping. In our dataset, online shopping has been perceived as a regular form of shopping behaviour, although some respondents stated that they “don’t like it”. It is worth noting that when it comes to online shopping, respondents did not mention any environmental concerns. Whereas in most European shops consumers have to pay for a plastic bag to reduce environmental harm, online shops, which use a lot of packaging and have a disputable carbon footprint, were not criticised at all.

#### *Little knowledge about what is “good quality”*

Although some respondents have stated that they care about the quality of garments, they have also admitted that they don’t know what the aspects that define “good quality” – whether it is material, cut, size, etc. “*I don’t quite understand it (the quality). When I buy something, I check if the product is not damaged. Generally, I don’t know which material is of better quality and which worse, so I don’t care*” (R20). Respondents have also stated that they only sometimes take care of their clothes by themselves (in other cases, they mentioned their family or significant others who take care of their clothes, incl. repairs), they don’t like handwashing, ironing and none of the respondents mentioned using dry-cleaners. This is rather in contradiction to the “sustainable” care of some delicate natural fibres, such as wool or silk, which need special care to last longer. Respondents have stated that “organic cotton” products are “*really expensive products which last longer*” (R25) made from “*quality materials*” (R24), which is rather in contradiction to recent research which shows that organic cotton takes up to 10-times more water and has lower quality fibers than ordinary cotton. Also, luxury as defined by the respondent it should say “*something that is beautiful even after 10 years*” (R75).

#### *Sustainability as a fashion trend?*

We have indicated that sustainability and slow fashion have become fashion trends. Respondents like brands such as Patagonia or they value programs developed by Levi’s to produce one pair of jeans with less water. As has been illustrated by the research one of the possible effects of corporate communication as the idea of sustainability by fashion brands has nested in the minds of youngest consumers; however, the question is how they process it. There are many examples of respondents giving very vague or indirect responses to the questions, for example; “Are you interested in sustainability in fashion?” – “*Yes, I like to*



*follow trends, what's in fashion and I might even participate in that (sustainability)'' (R58).*

It has already been mentioned that many respondents draw inspiration from influencers (individuals, celebrities and brands) on Instagram. Some declare interest in fashion brands which follow trends like “street style” or “hypebeast”, especially the collaborations of luxury and streetwear brands, like Louis Vuitton and Supreme or Kanye West, but these respondents did not mention environmental or ecological issues at all.

## DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have examined the perspectives of corporations and consumers on the environmental aspects of the fashion industry. We have used critical discourse analysis to explore both the corporate perspective, represented in sustainability and financial reports and the consumer perspectives among young people (18-23 years). We have examined a construction of social beliefs that tackles the environmental issues in the fashion industry.

When we apply the results to van Dijk’s social belief model, we can see that **the episodic memory is represented by personal mental models of specific situations** which mainly represents the recycling and reusing of garments. However, it does not include the mental model of “consume less” or “get more educated about the best options, like material quality, etc.”

**The semantic memory is set by the sociocultural norms and values** which are set by the (mostly European or U.S.) brands. They put the environmental issues in the centre of their corporate reports and some brands, like H&M, even write special Sustainability Reports. However, these reports bring many vague, unspecific, unrelated or misleading statements, which can be labelled as examples of greenwashing. However, the general sociocultural knowledge of the environmental problems helps to create a group ideology of Gen Z consumers who, according to public opinion research, perceive their attitudes towards the environment as one of the key requirements of brand behaviour. According to our research, this does not translate directly into consumer behaviour which would lead to decreased consumption of fashion goods. According to our data, consumers’ social attitudes are more likely to be described as a form of unconcerned interest in environmental changes, where consumers make compromises only when it’s in line with some of their other interests (e.g., saving money on second-hand goods, or seeing themselves as “conscious consumers”, etc.).

We have also noted clear contradictions which can mislead consumers. The respondents show a very limited knowledge about the materials and the “quality” of the garments. They value highly the “organic” cotton as environmentally friendly and, therefore, they prefer this material without hesitation.

A detailed overview of the research results applied to van Dijk are showed in the table 2

**Table 2.** Societal beliefs of fashion customers according to the van Dijk scheme

Levels of social beliefs by van Dijk	Individual	Corporate
Personal mental models	Recycling of used clothes in recycling bins Caring for good quality Upcycling second-hand clothes Positive attitudes towards organic cotton	
Social attitudes/group	Consumer behaviour is strongly favourable towards mass fast fashion retailers (McDonald's for everybody) Price / value sensitivity	Increasing price with less environmental impact Greenwashing practices to add better brand image
Group ideologies	Beliefs about increasing environmental attitudes with financial/social capital	Overproduction in fast fashion is framed as democratization (low prices for everyone) and supporting individual freedom of stylistic expression
General sociocultural knowledge	Increasing consumption leads to environmental harm	
	Citizen education about environmental behaviour	Compliance with environmental policies
Sociocultural knowledge criteria	Lack of knowledge about quality Lack of information for conscious decision making Lack of marketing literacy (greenwashing effect)	Knowledge of social trends and customer attitudes Knowledge about the environmental impact Sophisticated use of marketing and persuasive techniques to increase the environmental image of the company
Sociocultural norms / values	Caring for environment Caring for society inequalities	
	Personal wellbeing Personal gain (price sensitivity)	Increasing market share Increasing stock price and brand value

*Source: Authors, 2020.*

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FASHION INDUSTRY

There is a clear calling from Gen Z consumers towards fashion brands to take a more environmentally friendly stand. However, they do so also by using

severely misleading and greenwashing statements. Both the brands and the consumers refuse to take responsible action; consumers want fashionable goods at low prices and corporations want to increase their profits and growth.

One of the key problems that has been identified is the definition of overconsumption, which is absent in the corporate communications and public relations of fashion brands. Logically, buying less is in clear contradiction with the aims and goals of the fashion corporations. However, without tackling this issue, brand communication might be perceived as misleading and “greenwashing” the consumers.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we use critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an analytical tool, to examine two rather different data sets. Firstly, we analyse the brand financial and sustainability reports to define the “public interest” of fashion brands with regard to environment and sustainability (company-to-consumer perspective). Secondly, we use the same method to analyse the data set of semi-structured face-to-face interviews of Generation Z consumer’s attitudes towards fashion (consumer perspective). The research was divided into two phases/parts. A research question was stated for each part. In part 1 (RQ1: How are environmental issues defined from the perspectives of fashion brands?) we find that companies tend to be perceived as environmental and sustainable firms and often are able to use greenwashing methods. In part 2 (RQ2: How do young consumers perceive key ethical and environmental issues in the fashion industry?) respondents declared they care about the environment and are interested in social topics. Slow fashion and sustainability are new trends. Young people from Gen Z search for companies which have a “clear” image and are sustainable or responsible. On the other hand, they tend not to verify the information published by companies and they have lack of information about “bio” and “eco” fashion.

There are several limitations of this study. Firstly, we examined only brands who have participated in the UN Global Impact Charter, but the fashion industry includes many other textile and shoe producers. This includes smaller brands, which can control their supply management more effectively, to larger producers like Primark, who have complicated supply chain management and price policy, which clearly targets the price sensitivity of its customers with no regard to the environmental impact.

Secondly, our dataset of respondents covers mainly Czech and Slovak nationalities. Although other nationalities such as English and Finns etc. were included there were only a few of them. Despite representing the younger generation which has no connection to the former socialist Czechoslovak Republic; they have been brought up with some of those ideas and lifestyles, which will probably be different to the generations brought up in Western countries. In the socialist ideology where resources were scarce, people were

brought up to recycle most of the reusable materials like paper, glass, and metals from early childhood. It will probably be more natural for them to recycle and repair (or to buy repaired clothes).

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