

Understanding Gen Z's fashion preferences and the role of communication in sustainability

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DOI: [10.29180/978-615-6886-27-9_3](https://doi.org/10.29180/978-615-6886-27-9_3)

Abstract

The aim of the study is to explore Generation Z's consumer behaviour towards sustainable fashion, the key influencing factors, and the characteristics of sustainable fashion communication and marketing. Three focus group interviews were conducted with Gen Z university students in March 2025 to explore their clothing purchasing habits, perceptions of sustainability and attitudes towards fashion. The results indicate that sustainable fashion receives little attention, and consumers have limited access to information on sustainable fashion. The majority of young adults still prefer fast-fashion stores even if they lack knowledge of garment sustainability and product availability. The findings highlight that more effective communication is essential for promoting sustainable fashion by increasing consumer awareness and for guiding Gen Z towards informed purchasing decisions. Our findings can be of crucial relevance to marketing and communications professionals.

Keywords: sustainability, fashion, sustainable fashion, second-hand, marketing, communication

JEL Classification: M31, D38

Introduction

The topic of sustainable fashion is no longer a niche concern limited to environmental activists (Back, 2017). Instead, it has become a pressing global issue with profound social (Mukherjee, 2015), economic (Liu et al., 2021), and ecological implications (Singh-Bansal, 2024). Given the textile industry's significant contribution to pollution (Bhatia-Devraj, 2017), waste (Sarwar-Khan, 2022), and unethical labour practices (Gupta et al., 2015; Hanzer, 2022), it is crucial to understand how young consumers (Brand et al., 2022), particularly Generation Z (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023; Copeland, 2024), perceive and respond to the idea of sustainability in fashion (Liu-Hei, 2021). The choice to focus on sustainable fashion in this research stems from its increasing relevance both globally (Tódor, 2024) and within the local Hungarian context (Nagy, 2024). Sustainability is a rapidly evolving discourse (Györi et al., 2024; Kolnhof-Derecskei et al., 2024), and the fashion industry represents one of the most visible and relatable domains where individuals, especially young people, can make environmentally conscious choices (McNeill- Venter, 2019). The members of Gen Z are not only the most active consumers of fashion (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021) but also the generation expected to bring about meaningful change (Máté et al., 2023; Fodor et al., 2024).

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Understanding the factors that influence young people's clothing purchases is essential for several reasons. First, it allows for the identification of value systems, lifestyle preferences, and constraints – be they economic, cultural, or psychological – that guide everyday decisions (Sidorchuk et al., 2016). Second, the composition of young people's wardrobes reflects their consumption patterns, material priorities, and environmental attitudes (Kovács, 2021). The analysis of these patterns provides insights into how much of their clothing is sustainable, second-hand, or underused, and what this means in terms of waste and overproduction (Hietala, 2024). Moreover, investigating the perceptions and attitudes of young consumers towards sustainable fashion offers a window into their readiness to transition towards more ethical consumption (Liu-Hei, 2021). Attitudes shape behaviour, and without a clear understanding of what sustainability means to this demographic, it is difficult to design interventions, campaigns, or educational efforts that truly resonate. Whether sustainable fashion is seen as desirable, accessible, or merely aspirational has a direct impact on its adoption.

Sustainable fashion requires innovative business models that combine economic, environmental, and social values (Gyóri-Ócsai, 2014). The question is how a given company can incorporate the concept of sustainability into the firm's business model. However, the success of green fashion also depends on consumers, the theoretical framework for which is provided by slow fashion and the circular economy (Domingos et al., 2022). Considering that success depends on consumer behaviour, attitudes and decisions, discourse on sustainability and related education are essential among students (Tódor, 2024). This study specifically focuses on Hungarian Generation Z, a group that remains underrepresented in international sustainability research. While many studies explore youth attitudes in Western Europe, Hungarian Gen Z faces unique economic conditions, cultural influences (Kovács et al., 2024), and levels of access to sustainable options (Kovács, 2021). Understanding how these local factors intersect with global sustainability narratives is key to developing context-sensitive insights and recommendations. The aim of the research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Hungarian university students relate to the concept of sustainable fashion, how their clothing reflects this commitment, and what opportunities and barriers exist to promote more sustainable consumer behaviour among this influential age group.

Literature review

Generation Z's wardrobe composition

Understanding the wardrobe composition of Generation Z is a vital aspect of examining this generation's broader fashion consumption habits. Research by Klepp and Bjerck (2014) highlights that a wardrobe is more than a storage unit: it reflects complex social practices, values, and personal identity. The authors argue that the wardrobe is a "site of everyday life," where decisions regarding what to keep, discard, or purchase are deeply tied to individual values and cultural narratives. Self-expression is important for young adults (Máté et al., 2023), especially university students (Szegedi et al., 2024), also fashion and clothing are one of the ways they express themselves (Nunes, 2023). Clothing in one's young stage of life is simply a functional product, but also an identity-forming tool, and the choice of second-hand clothing often becomes a value-based decision (Palomo-Domínguez et al. 2023). Hungarian consumers have become increasingly open to alternative forms of fashion consumption (Balogh-Harangozó, 2025) including the purchase of second-hand clothing (Vizi, 2023). Buying second-hand clothes is a very conscious way to update your wardrobe, as consumers pay much lower prices than they would for new clothes, and the environmental impact is negligible, as no new clothes need to be manufactured (Vizi, 2023). Buying second-hand clothes is a mainstream phenomenon among Generation Z, with young people typically having several second-hand items in their wardrobes (Liu et al., 2024). Gen Z consumers, particularly university students,

are increasingly conscious of space management and tend to organize and downsize their wardrobes regularly. This is consistent with the concept of wardrobe curation, where consumers deliberately maintain a smaller number of high-utility items rather than accumulate large quantities of clothing (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014). This practice is also in alignment with Chang's (2014) findings, which suggest that young consumers are moving away from overconsumption towards meaningful ownership, students are more likely to evaluate garments based on longevity, versatility, and personal fit rather than on impulse or trend alignment. In an average person's closet there are about 148 individual items, 36% of Gen Z buys new clothing at least monthly (Wunderlabel, (2025)). According to Kim and Lim (2001), fashion orientation significantly influences consumer segmentation, with more fashion-involved consumers likely to own larger wardrobes and participate in trend-driven consumption. Most consumers are interested in personalizing products and are prepared to pay more for this, and the desire for individualized colour and customized clothing is particularly high (Wunderlabel, 2025).

Clothing purchasing behaviour of young adults

Younger citizens with higher levels of education tend to exhibit more environmentally friendly consumer behaviour and have a stronger intention to purchase sustainable clothing products (Dangelico et al., 2022). The purchasing behaviour of young adults, particularly those in Gen Z, is increasingly shaped by a tension between aspirational sustainability and entrenched fast fashion habits (Edberg & Köhnlein, 2025). Gen Z consumers often experience what Harris et al. (2016) term a "moral ambivalence," where they are aware of sustainability challenges but continue to purchase fast fashion due to convenience, accessibility, and style predictability. Furthermore, Kim and Lim's (2001) research on shopping orientation found that hedonic motivations such as enjoyment and novelty-seeking are strong among younger consumers, and drive impulsive purchasing behaviours even in the context of sustainability awareness. This explains the continued appeal of fast fashion chains such as Zara and H&M, where trend alignment and visual merchandising reinforce purchasing urges.

Price sensitivity remains a critical barrier to sustainable purchasing. Chang (2014) found that sustainability must align with economic realities so that consumer behaviour can be influenced. Thus, while Gen Z is conceptually aligned with ethical values, price and style often outweigh environmental concerns in real-world purchasing decisions. Buying second-hand clothes in shops is a step towards sustainability, as it gives a second life to items of clothing that their previous owners have grown tired of (Vizi 2023). Second-hand clothing stores are widely available in Hungary: the largest chains, such as Háda, have more than 80 stores nationwide, including not only the capital but also smaller rural towns (Háda 2025). These shops are often located in shopping centres or busy city centres (Várnai 2018), which is convenient for young consumers. There is also growing evidence that digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping these perceptions. The rise of second-hand marketplaces such as Vinted has normalized sustainable shopping, making it more convenient and socially accepted. Harris et al. (2016) note that ethical products must be embedded in familiar, enjoyable consumption experiences to gain traction among young people.

Attitudes and perceptions of young consumers towards sustainable clothing

The concept of sustainable clothing is multifaceted for Generation Z. According to Klepp and Bjerck (2014), sustainability in clothing is perceived not only through ecological impact but also through ethical sourcing, durability, and lifecycle value. Chang (2014) emphasizes that for sustainability to resonate with young consumers, it must be personally meaningful. Gen Z, therefore, evaluates sustainable fashion not only in terms of planetary benefit but also based on

how it aligns with personal identity and social image. Sustainable fashion, when perceived as “cool,” “unique,” or “expressive,” is more likely to be adopted.

Attitudinally, Generation Z expresses strong support for sustainable fashion but faces considerable obstacles in translating these beliefs into consistent behaviour. Harris et al. (2016) point out that attitudinal alignment with sustainability often fails to result in behavioural change without systemic support and incentives. Klepp and Bjerck (2014) argue that consumers’ daily routines and clothing habits must be considered in designing sustainable interventions. For instance, ease of access to sustainable options and visually appealing retail environments are critical in shifting day-to-day purchasing patterns.

Social influence plays a critical role in shaping sustainable attitudes. Chang (2014) found that peer behaviours, social media content, and the presence of sustainability in pop culture can enhance positive attitudes and normalize ethical consumption. Therefore, communication strategies that leverage influencers and user-generated content can be powerful in nudging Gen Z towards sustainability. Importantly, Kim and Lim (2001) identified “value consciousness” as a defining feature of some young consumers. Those who score high in this domain are more likely to integrate sustainability into their decision-making, especially when messaging emphasizes long-term savings, garment durability, and emotional value.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were identified:

1. What characterises Generation Z’ wardrobe composition?
2. What factors determine the clothing purchasing behaviour of young adults?
3. What does sustainable clothing mean to Gen Z?
4. What are the attitudes of young consumers towards sustainable clothing?

Research methodology

The aim of the study is to explore Generation Z’s consumer behaviour towards sustainable fashion, the key influencing factors, and the characteristics of sustainable fashion communication and marketing. A qualitative research method has been chosen, as it has been used by Harris et al. (2016), Liu-Hei (2021), also Kovács (2021) to investigate this topic. The focus groups method was chosen because the formation of opinions and meanings observed in social reality often takes place through interactions in a social context (Kitzinger, 1994). In addition, the focus group allows the study of social influences and norms through the emergence of group dynamics and collective narratives (Vicsek, 2006). Focus group interviews are understood as group discussions led by a moderator and focused around a research topic (Vicsek, 2017). The qualitative data analysis was conducted using traditional content analysis with Nvivo 14 software, using open coding as recommended by Ghauri and Grønhaug (2016), as well as Sántha and Tódor (2022).

Three focus group interviews were conducted with Gen Z university students in March 2025 to explore their clothing purchasing habits, perceptions of sustainability and attitudes towards fashion. The interviews were conducted on the recommendations of Kitzinger (2006), lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were preceded by a pilot survey. The focus groups were composed of Hungarian university students aged between 18 and 25, representing a diverse mix of genders and geographical backgrounds. In total, three focus groups were conducted with 35 participants altogether, of whom 13 were men and 22 were women, which clearly reflects the predominance of female respondents. The average age of the participants was between 21 and 22, so we can talk about young adults of Generation Z. Group 1 consisted of 9 individuals (4 males and 5 females), Group 2 included 15 participants (6 males and 9 females), and Group 3 included 11 participants (3 males and 8 females). Participants were recruited from both urban (primarily Budapest) and rural areas, ensuring a balanced representation of regional perspectives. All focus group members shared a common characteristic of being actively engaged in higher education and belonging to Generation Z, thus offering relevant insights into

youth attitudes and behaviours regarding fashion consumption. The sample consists of university students, many of whom also work alongside their studies. This means that the participants are able to make their own decisions about their shopping habits not only as consumers but also as young adults with an income. The distribution by place of residence also shows a varied picture: Budapest residents dominate the second focus group, while in the first and third groups, the distribution between rural and urban participants is more balanced. This geographical diversity is an important dimension, as access to sustainable clothing (e.g., second-hand stores, Háda, Humana) can vary geographically, which influences consumer attitudes. The three focus groups in the sample consisted of young people from diverse backgrounds but with common generational characteristics, whose opinions provide a reliable picture of the diversity of attitudes and perceptions towards second-hand clothing.

Results

Generation Z' wardrobe composition

The composition of Generation Z's wardrobes reflects the diverse lifestyles, values, and purchasing behaviours of today's young adults. Based on the focus group interviews, Hungarian university students aged 18–25 possess wardrobes that range from highly curated and minimalist to large and trend-oriented. This diversity illustrates the complexity of Gen Z's relationship with fashion, where sustainability, style, and space-consciousness intersect in varying degrees. The average wardrobe size varies significantly, with some respondents possessing about 100-150 items. Our respondents tend to either have a large proportion (around 50%) or a very small proportion (less than 5%) of second-hand items.

Young people are becoming more aware of their surroundings and of making the most of their space. Many participants said they regularly sort their clothes so that their wardrobe is not cluttered and chaotic.

Despite variations in size, most participants stated that they use more than half of the items in their wardrobe on a regular basis. Some students emphasized that they strive to actively rotate their outfits and avoid unnecessary accumulation. These consumers tend to maintain smaller wardrobes and focus on versatile, timeless pieces that can be worn across seasons. However, another group admitted that a significant portion of their clothes goes unworn. Among frequent shoppers, many garments are purchased impulsively or because they align with short-lived trends. As one participant noted: *"Sometimes I buy something and wear it once or twice, then I forget about it."* The respondents often view clothing as disposable, and the wardrobe becomes a storage space for outdated or disfavoured items. A sense of guilt or awareness occasionally accompanied these admissions, indicating an internal conflict between values and behaviour.

An interesting dimension of wardrobe management relates to borrowing and renting clothing, which were found to be relatively rare practices among participants. Most students stated that they do not generally borrow clothes from others, except in casual or familial contexts (e.g., siblings or close friends). Even less common is the use of formal clothing rental services. Where rental did occur, it was limited to special occasions such as weddings, graduation or other ceremonial events. These rentals were typically for formal dresses or suits, and even then some participants preferred to buy inexpensive new items from fast fashion retailers rather than rent: *"I rented a dress once for a wedding, but usually I just buy something cheap from H&M."* Most students had never rented a garment, and some expressed doubts about hygiene or convenience. This suggests that while the concept of shared clothing resonates at the personal level, the institutionalized practice of fashion rental is not yet embedded in the Gen Z fashion culture in Hungary.

Clothing purchasing behaviour of young adults

Participants' attitudes towards clothing purchases ranged from highly conscious and critical to neutral or even impulsive. This heterogeneity reflects the multifaceted nature of youth consumer culture, shaped by economic conditions, peer influence, digital platforms, and growing environmental awareness. In terms of purchase frequency, most participants reported buying clothes once every 1–2 months, although this varied depending on personal needs, seasonal changes, and emotional triggers. As one participant stated: *“If I’m having a bad day, I go and buy something small for myself - it cheers me up.”* This illustrates how clothing consumption occasionally serves a psychological function, acting as a reward or coping mechanism. When asked about monthly spending on clothing, most participants estimated they spend between 10,000 -25,000 HUF.

However, spending was typically higher during seasonal transitions (e.g., winter to spring) or promotional periods (e.g., Black Friday, Glamour Days), which indicates that discount-based shopping is prevalent and often planned in advance.

The results also highlighted several key characteristics of clothing purchasing behaviour. In general, the participants were deeply influenced by peer examples and online trends, particularly via platforms like Instagram and TikTok. While sustainability was a recurring theme in the interviews, it was often secondary to price, aesthetic appeal, and availability. Several respondents admitted that although they are aware of environmental impacts, they still favour fast fashion brands due to their affordability and accessibility: *“I try to avoid fast fashion, but when there’s a big sale, I go for it - it’s cheap and looks good.”* Clothing purchases were often driven by impulse rather than necessity. Some participants described situations in which they bought items they did not actually need simply because it felt good at the moment or the price was too attractive to pass up. This reflects broader patterns of consumption motivated by instant gratification, a trait commonly associated with Generation Z. The interviews revealed that identity expression plays a central role in clothing choices. Many participants view their clothing as a reflection of their personal style, values, or subcultural belonging. While some prioritize comfort and functionality, others are more concerned with uniqueness and how their outfits are perceived by peers. One participant shared: *“Clothing defines me. How I dress tells others who I am.”*

Perception of sustainable clothing among Gen Z

For most participants, the concept of sustainable fashion is linked primarily with second-hand shopping, recycling, and prolonging the lifespan of garments (Figure 1). This understanding is rooted in practicality and everyday experiences rather than in abstract definitions or technical sustainability frameworks. The associated word cloud generated from participant input provides a concise visual summary of what first comes to mind when they hear the term “sustainable clothing.” Commonly mentioned terms included *“recycling,” “environment-friendly,” “second-hand,” “waste-reduction,”* and *“Vinted”* alongside more emotive or practical words like *“ethical,” “durability,”* and *“unique.”* This indicates that sustainable fashion is not merely an environmental concern but a multi-dimensional construct. When discussing the extent to which the participants own sustainable clothing, most participants estimated that sustainable or second-hand items constitute a modest but growing portion of their wardrobes. Most of them indicated that around 5% or less of their clothes come from second-hand sources or are considered sustainable. This aligns with the nowadays increasing visibility and acceptance of second-hand platforms such as Vinted, which many participants actively use.

frequented these stores due to ease of access, familiarity, and predictable sizing: *“I try to avoid fast fashion, but when I need something specific, I go to Zara - it’s just easier.”* This highlights a prevalent theme: young consumers are not inherently opposed to sustainable fashion, but multiple constraints complicate their ability to prioritize sustainable fashion in practice. Additionally, sustainable purchasing was described more as an occasional practice than a lifestyle commitment. Most participants reported that they sometimes buy second-hand clothes or occasionally check sustainable brands, but they do not make it a consistent habit. Fast fashion remains the default, particularly for last-minute needs, formal wear, or when trend-following is a priority.

Interestingly, several participants discussed their emotional connection to second-hand shopping. They described it as *“treasure hunting”* or as a way to find unique pieces that no one else has. This suggests that sustainable fashion can be emotionally rewarding and even exciting when framed in the right way. However, this emotional appeal was mostly limited to second-hand or vintage shopping, rather than new garments from certified sustainable brands.

Another noteworthy aspect is the moral framing of purchase decisions. Some participants expressed guilt or discomfort about buying from fast-fashion retailers, particularly when reminded of the ethical or environmental costs: *“I know it’s bad, but sometimes I don’t feel like I have a choice.”* This ambivalence reveals cognitive dissonance: participants are aware of the issues surrounding fast fashion but feel disempowered or constrained by financial, social, or logistical limitations. Therefore, education alone may not be enough; systemic changes in pricing, access, and communication are needed to shift behaviour at scale. However, it should be noted that access to sustainable fashion options, whether second-hand stores or eco-conscious brands, is limited, especially in rural areas or smaller towns. Buying second-hand clothing, especially in physical stores, has proven to be time-consuming and often frustrating. Several participants noted that sizes are limited and that it takes a lot of energy to sort through piles of unorganized clothes. Some still associate second-hand clothes with poor cleanliness or low-quality materials, despite others having the opposite experience.

The discussions revealed that communication plays a pivotal role in influencing young consumers’ attitudes and behaviours. Participants emphasized the need for educational content and more engaging, visual storytelling from companies: *“I think brands should explain more - not just say ‘we’re green’, but show how and why.”* Several respondents suggested that platforms like Vinted, Háda, or Humana could increase their impact by integrating sustainability content into their digital and in-store communications. Informative posts on Instagram, TikTok videos explaining environmental benefits, and point-of-sale messages were all proposed as potential methods to raise awareness.

Conclusions

Young Hungarian university students demonstrate environmentally friendly consumer behaviour and show a strong intention to purchase sustainable clothing products, which is consistent with the results of Dangelico et al. (2022). Young adults’ clothing purchasing behaviour is highly context-dependent, and blend economic rationality with emotional and social drivers. Harris et al.’s (2016) findings are supported by our focus group data showing that while participants acknowledged the environmental impact of fast fashion, they still prefer it for its time efficiency and consistent sizing. Their consumption patterns are characterized by a delicate balance between trend-following and ethical intention, with financial limitations and convenience often tipping the scale in favour of fast fashion. Our findings are consistent with the results of Harris et al. (2016), who found that ethical consumption remains a secondary priority for many consumers unless it is accompanied by tangible personal benefits such as affordability or convenience. While there is growing openness to sustainable choices, these must be accompanied by competitive pricing, modern design, and availability to become

mainstream options. The respondents identified buying second-hand clothes as a form of sustainable fashion. Young Hungarians enjoy shopping in second-hand clothing stores, which is consistent with Vizi's (2023) findings. Online second-hand clothing platforms (Vinted, Facebook groups) are also very popular and easily accessible.

The findings of Klepp and Bjerck (2014) are consistent with the focus group data, where participants described sustainable clothing in terms of durability, secondary use, and reduced ecological footprint. Generation Z values sustainable fashion not only for its environmental benefits, but also for how well it aligns with their personal identity and social image. Sustainable fashion is more likely to become mainstream if it is perceived as “*cool*,” “*unique*,” or “*expressive*.” Nevertheless, significant perception barriers remain. Misinformation, greenwashing, and a limited understanding of the concept of clothing sustainability can hinder informed decision-making. Educational interventions and supply chain transparency are therefore essential to deepen Gen Z's commitment to sustainable fashion practices.

The size of Hungarian Generation Z students' wardrobes varies greatly: while some maintain minimalist wardrobes, others have 100-150 items, and this is influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, interest in fashion, and shopping frequency. Young people are interested in customizing clothes, which confirm international findings (Wunderlabel, 2025). University students in Hungary do not really use borrowed clothes or rented products, they regularly sort their clothes so that their wardrobe is not cluttered and chaotic. The low prevalence of rental clothing suggests that cultural norms, lack of infrastructure, or limited awareness may be barriers to its adoption among Hungarian Gen Z. Moreover, concerns about hygiene, sizing, and return logistics also contribute to hesitation. In contrast, formal clothing rental services were largely unfamiliar or unused among participants.

Purchasing behaviour towards sustainable clothing is shaped by a combination of ideals, constraints, and compromises. Their intentions are frequently aligned with sustainability, but these intentions are diluted by external pressures such as cost, time, access, and social expectations. Understanding this nuanced landscape is essential for designing interventions – whether through policy, branding, or education – that resonate with this generation's values and lived realities.

Among the limitations of the research, we would like to emphasize that the study was based on qualitative methodology, so the results cannot be generalized, the sample was small (three focus groups, a total of 35 people) and consisted exclusively of university students in Hungary, so the cultural and social context may have strongly influenced the results. As a future research direction, we plan to conduct a quantitative consumer survey, which will allow for statistical conclusions and international comparisons. In addition, it may be worthwhile to conduct a longitudinal study to map changing consumer habits or to examine target groups, such as older consumers or those not enrolled in higher education, to gain a more complete picture of the research topic.

In conclusion, young consumers show a growing openness towards sustainable clothing, but this is tempered by real and perceived obstacles. Addressing these challenges through affordability, accessibility, and targeted communication can help align values with behaviours. Sustainable fashion will gain greater traction among Gen Z if it is positioned not only as an ethical choice but also as an accessible, stylish, and socially relevant one. Communication must focus not only on raising awareness but also on inspiring trust and simplifying decision-making. Young consumers want to do the right thing but they need help in understanding what that is, and how it fits into their lifestyle and budget. Based on our research findings, we recommend the following to make the communication of sustainable clothing companies more effective: practical sustainability tips on social media, explanations of textile recycling and donation processes. We also recommend collaborating with influencers or brand ambassadors who present sustainable fashion in an accessible way.

Acknowledgement

Project no. K 146850 has been implemented with support from the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary, through the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the K_23 „OTKA” Kutatási témapályázat funding scheme.

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