

Impact of behavioral consumption decisions on sustainable purchasing by Gen Z in the Clothing and fashion industry with special reference to the end of the Role of Speciesism and promote Cruelty Free products

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the impact of behavioral consumption decisions on sustainable purchasing by Generation Z consumers, particularly in the fashion and apparel industry with special reference to the end of the role of speciesism and cruelty free products. It was found that even if this generation was concerned and believed in speciesism as well as promoting cruelty free products and the changes in fashion prevented them from completely purchasing these products. They adopted a mix of the standard products and those that specified speciesism and believed in promoting sympathy towards animals. The only way that the two can be combined is through economies of scale where larger conglomerates start practicing and believing in what this generation wants.

Keywords: Generation Z, Speciesism, Ethical Consumerism, Circular Economy, Brand Transparency, Greenwashing, Value–Action Gap, Cruelty-Free Products

1. Introduction

Gen Z generation is defined as young individuals who are born between 1997 and 2012, representing the first generation to grow up completely in the digital age. “This generation is widely regarded as socially conscious, pragmatic, and diverse, with a strong inclination toward value-driven and responsible decision-making” (Jayatissa, 2023). The generation is marked by an increased awareness in social, environmental, and ethical issues such as climate change, sustainability and social injustice.

Sustainability, in this context, not only means the protection of the environment but also the adoption of ethical practices in the production process. In the fashion and apparel industry, this concept becomes significant because this industry is usually associated with the concept of fast fashion, which is considered very harmful to the environment. Being one of the most fashion-

conscious generations, Gen Z is very interested in fashion as a means of self-expression. As this generation is digitally influenced, fashion plays a very significant role in their lives. Research shows that Generation Z consumers are more likely to support brands that demonstrate strong environmental sustainability and ethical practices, and many are willing to pay a premium for such products (Nielsen, 2015). However, this high involvement in the fashion industry is now being accompanied by the sustainability aspect, which is affecting their purchasing decisions in favor of sustainable fashion practices such as the adoption of brands that use eco-friendly materials in their production process, adopt the concept of recycling, etc. Therefore, this aspect becomes very significant.

Apart from the environmental concerns, sustainability also refers to ethical considerations, specially relating to the treatment of animals. One such concept is speciesism which refers to discrimination against non-human animals, favouring the interests of one's own species (usually humans) over others. In the fashion industry, speciesism is reflected in the production and use of animal products like leather, fur, and wool in products. It is also represented in the process of animal testing. However, with the rise of Gen Z consumers, there is a higher level of awareness and sensitivity toward the use of animal products. "This has led to the increased adoption of cruelty-free and vegan commodities that are created without the process of animal testing at any stage of the production process" (Jain & Mishra, 2020). Therefore, the adoption of such products is not only a matter of personal preference but also a reflection of the ethical identity of the new age consumers.

2. Literature Review/Background

Gen Z consumers understand the worth and value of goods in a way that is not the same as others. For Gen Z it is not just about preferences but **purpose**, for example climate change is not just a threat but a lived reality. This generation has grown up during a period, marked by visible climate crisis. Exposure to environmental issues and social media has shaped Gen Z's attitudes towards sustainability. Additionally, growing concern for animal welfare has increased interest in cruelty-free products.

The fashion industry raises serious questions about the balance between economic growth, sustainability and environmental protection and cruelty free products. The textile industry is one of the largest contributors to global pollution as it is associated with excessive water consumption, carbon emissions and textile waste. The concept of fast fashion further has worsened this problem through overproduction and overconsumption. This highlights the unsustainable nature of fashion and clothing industries in India, which has increased pressure and need to shift toward more sustainable products.

But there are several conflicting points that researchers have analyzed. Though the production of cruelty-free products minimizes the damage caused to animals, these products are not always sustainable since there is no guarantee that they are not made of synthetic materials that harm the environment. The problem becomes more complicated when the need for people is to combine their concerns about the environment along with the question of treating animals ethically. Some scholars have argued that not all sustainable or cruelty-free choices are fully informed, as social media can sometimes promote trends without deeper understanding, leading to issues such as greenwashing.(Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Growing demand for environmental concerns and increasing awareness about speciesism have encouraged innovation in the clothing industry. Many companies are now incorporating eco-friendly materials, reducing waste through circular production models, and introducing cruelty-free alternatives to traditional animal-based products (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

3. Research Gap and Methodology

This paper analyses the consumption patterns of the Gen Z generation with respect to sustainability and speciesism. What are the factors that they consider? Are these factors the only ones that influence their choice? What are the other factors involved? In what way do their thought process and buying patterns influence their peers? How far have they been able to change the production alternatives of the textile manufacturing units?

The methodology adopted would be of the mixed method type, using authentic secondary data to substantiate quantitative data. Qualitative data would be used to explain the trends that emerge from quantitative analysis.

4. Analysis:

Section 1: Why Is Gen Z Drawn to Sustainable Fashion?

Environmental Awareness and Climate Consciousness

Environmental awareness can be considered one of the main aspects that affect the purchasing decisions made by Generation Z concerning clothes. Due to constant exposure to environmental matters through social media, education systems, documentaries, and online advocacy, the members of Generation Z are more aware about sustainability in the fashion industry.

Fashion is among the top-polluting industries in the world owing to water usage, carbon emission, chemical pollution, and textile waste created by fast fashion products. Due to the awareness about the impact of environmental issues created by the fashion industry, the members

of Generation Z are concerned in developing alternative solutions like organic cotton, recycled material, and vegan leather.

Sustainable consumption enables them to act socially and morally responsible. It plays an important role in forming their attitudes towards existing fashion brands. Consumers tend to appreciate companies that are environmentally responsible in all aspects from sustainable packaging, labor ethics, recycling programs, and carbon reduction efforts.

Nevertheless, even though consumers are concerned about environmental issues, they still buy fast fashion items. It is called the "attitude-behavior gap." Even though Gen Z consumers are positively inclined towards sustainability, factors like lower price, easy availability, and fast-pace fashion trends along with social influence make them opt for unsustainable purchasing behavior. *This proves that awareness does not necessarily lead to sustainable consumption.*

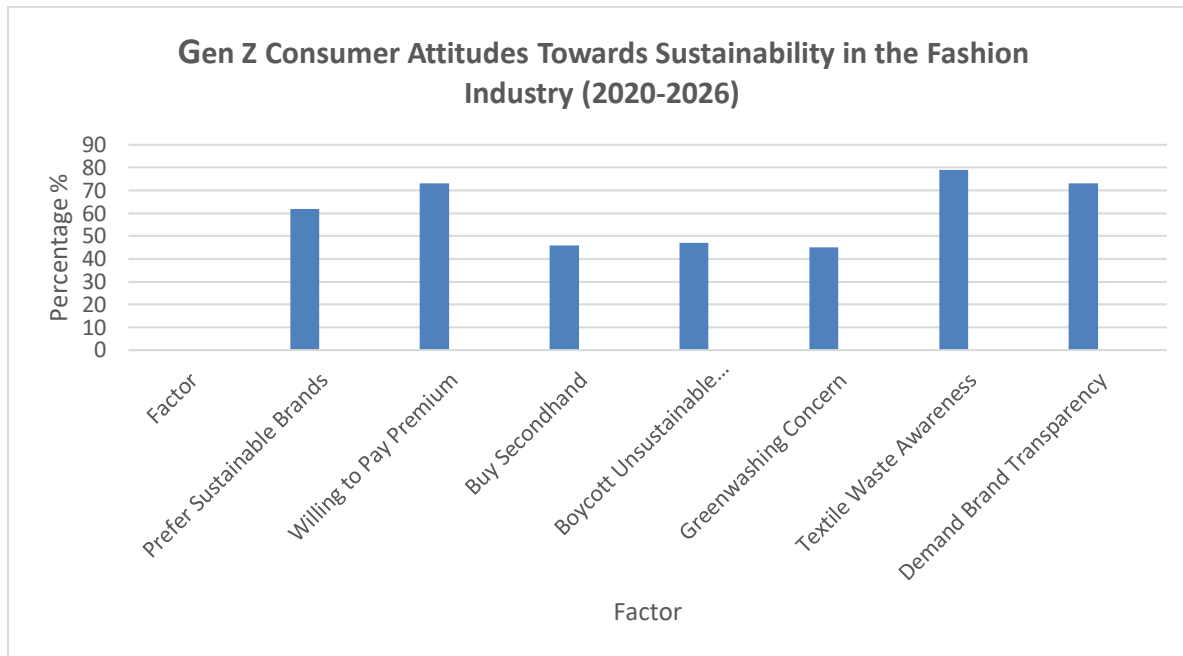
According to Pradeep and Pradeep (2023), climate awareness greatly impacts the attitudes and intention to purchase sustainable products among Generation Z consumers.

Table 1- Gen Z Consumer Attitudes Towards Sustainability in the Fashion Industry (2020-2026)

Factor	Percentage %
Prefer Buying from Sustainable Brands	62%
Willing to Pay More for Sustainable Products	73%
Stopped Buying Brands Due to Sustainability Concerns	46%
Stopped Buying Brands Due to Sustainability Concerns	47%
Concerned About Greenwashing	45%
Believe Reducing Textile Waste is Important	79%
Want Brand Transparency on Sustainability	73%

Source: First Insight, The State of Consumer Spending: Gen Z Shoppers Demand Sustainable Retail (2020), <https://www.firstinsight.com/white-papers-posts/gen-z-shoppers-demand-sustainability> ; rawshot.ai, Gen Z Sustainable Fashion Statistics (2026), <https://rawshot.ai/statistic/gen-z-sustainable-fashion>

Graph 2- Gen Z Consumer Attitudes Towards Sustainability in the Fashion Industry (2020-2026)



This bar graph displays the opinions and actions of Gen Z consumers regarding sustainable fashion. According to the data, 79% think that it is important to decrease waste from textiles, and 73% expect transparency from companies in regard to their sustainability initiatives. Besides, 73% are ready to spend extra money on sustainable goods, and 47% would refuse from using environmentally damaging brands. Nonetheless, only 46% purchase used clothes, and 45% consider greenwashing to be a problem.

Personal Identity, Ethics, and Self-Expression

There are many young people who choose to wear fashion that expresses their personality, values, and social identity. Sustainable fashion allows consumers to express their morality and environment-friendly actions through purchase.

To many Gen Z consumers, buying sustainable fashion becomes a statement of morality and social conscience. It allows consumers to demonstrate that they are concerned about the impacts of climate change and labor exploitation and are interested in the preservation of the environment. Sustainable fashion items like second-hand, vintage, hand-made, and recycled fashion items allow consumers to express their uniqueness and creativity away from mass-produced fast fashion.

Moreover, ethical consumerism makes consumers emotionally satisfied. At the same time, identity-based consumerism can present contradictions as well. It is possible that the motive behind some consumers purchasing sustainable fashion items is dependent on the need to improve one's image. Thus, sustainability itself has become a fashion trend today. The ethical identity acts both psychologically and socially (Zhang et al.(2023).

Brand Transparency, Authenticity, and Trust

The Generation Z consumers are highly concerned about the elements of transparency and authenticity while selecting fashion brands to purchase from. Brands which resort to "greenwashing" tactics to mislead consumers regarding the level of environmental consideration by the organization are not considered trustful anymore. Most fashion brands tend to make false and ambiguous promises regarding the sustainability of products using words like eco-friendly or green.

Thus, the issue of authenticity of products and sustainability becomes critical among Generation Z consumers. Young consumers appreciate the brand transparency, its manufacturing procedures, and sustainability metrics. The brands that present their sustainability reports and certificates can be seen as more authentic.

Fashion Trends, Aesthetic Appeal, and Desire for Style

Aesthetic appeal is equally important to sustainability for GenZ consumers while making a purchase decision. Research by Zam et al. (2022) shows that personal fashion preferences and self-confidence play a crucial role in what young people buy, indicating that for this age group, products need to be both ethical and good-looking to draw their interest. This is why sustainable fashion really resonates with Gen Z, especially second-hand items and unique styles. These choices are eco-friendly and let them show off their personal style, unlike mainstream fast fashion. Social media platforms like Depop and Instagram boost this even more, creating tight-knit groups who care about how clothes look and where they stand ethically.

However, when sustainable fashion doesn't meet the mark in terms of looks, offering styles that seem basic, outdated, or out of touch with what's trending on TikTok and Instagram, Gen Z goes right back to fast fashion. This happens because social media isn't just showing trends; it's making new ones quickly. For example, a trend that becomes viral on Tik Tok on Monday is available on clothing brands like Shein by Thursday. While Sustainable brands, sticking to their ethical production schedules, might need weeks or months to catch up. With a generation that follows fashion in real-time through their feeds, this delay makes sustainable options feel permanently lagged.

Section 2: Why Does Gen Z Not Fully Adopt Sustainable Fashion

Peer Influence and Social Acceptance

Peer influence is the main determining factor impacting Gen Z consumer behavior. Considering that Generation Z members are socially oriented, many tend to seek acceptance and approval from friends, classmates, colleagues, and online communities. Clothes become means of self-expression, communication, and building a personal identity.

Youth is prone to external pressure and is highly impacted by preferences and behaviors of others. The adoption of sustainable fashion choices will be significantly easier and faster when such fashion becomes socially acceptable among peers. Today, sustainable fashion is becoming synonymous with social awareness, responsibility, and intelligence. In addition to promoting certain fashion styles and trends, peer influence impacts brand choices as well. Recommendations of people from the same social circles tend to carry more weight for consumers than commercial advertising.

Nevertheless, peer pressure can also result in overconsumption behaviors. Fashionable and trendy appearance is the main aspect of social life that results in fast fashion choices as people seek cheap and trendy clothes. *Thus, the contradiction arises in terms of sustainable fashion, peer group influences and affordability.* With constant fashion trends emerging, sustainable fashion consumption might become a challenge.

Price Sensitivity and Affordability

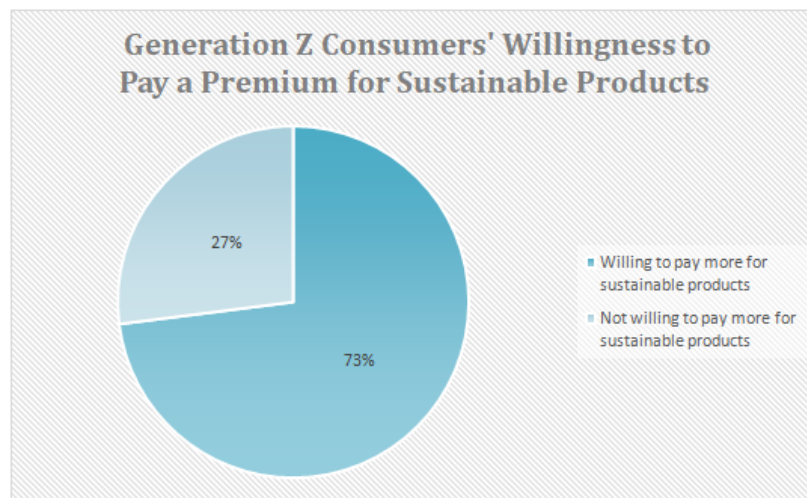
Price plays a major role as an obstacle to sustainable fashion consumption by Gen Z customers. Although many younger consumers support environmental sustainability and ethical production, they face difficulties due to their financial situation when shopping. Young people who belong to generation Z are mostly students or young employees whose spending is not that high. The cost of sustainable fashion products is higher compared to fast fashion because of the ethical approach to raw materials, paying decent salaries to workers, and environmentally friendly processes involved. As a result, many people consider sustainable fashion products expensive.

Fast fashion producers like Shien, Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 who believe in sustainability market their products in accordance with current trends at a competitive price. This makes the clothes attractive for young environmentally responsible customers. Though consumers may be advocates of ethical consumption in terms of ideology, their purchasing behaviors are likely to be affected by economic constraints. While fast fashion makes it easy for consumers to obtain multiple trendy items at reduced prices. Sustainable fashion focuses more on durability and

practicality. Vogue Business (2023) indicated that it is difficult for consumers to focus on sustainability when they lack financial means and must keep up with trends.

Consequently, pricing becomes a pivotal factor in deciding the fate of sustainable fashion brands within the Generation Z market segment.

Graph 2- Generation Z Consumers' Willingness to Pay a Premium for Sustainable Products



Source-<https://www.firstinsight.com/white-papers-posts/gen-z-shoppers-demand-sustainability>

In the graph above, 73% of Gen-Z consumers are willing to pay more for sustainability while 27% are not willing, which implies that price is still one of the main factors that prevent people from being sustainable when it comes to buying clothes.

Influence of Social Media and Digital Platforms

Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and Pinterest greatly impact fashion trends, shopping behavior, perception of brands, and lifestyles. As a large proportion of Gen Z lives is spent on the Internet, the content posted online can significantly affect consumer behavior.

Influencers, celebrities, fashion bloggers, and other content creators help promote sustainable fashion practices. Social media is known to create a lot of psychological and emotional influences. People are continuously comparing themselves to each other online and trying to gain social recognition by choosing certain fashion products. Consequently, social media strongly influences fashion purchasing decisions.

But at the same time, social media has raised awareness about unethical working conditions, environmental degradation, and overconsumption associated with fast fashion companies. The campaigns against pollution, and exploitative production practices have inspired Gen Z consumers to pursue sustainable alternatives. However, despite raising such awareness, social media also promotes overconsumption through trends and haul culture (this means that influencers flaunt their expensive clothing items for their followers) resulting in excessive purchases.

The research carried out by Kaur et al. (2025) reveals that exposure to social media has a considerable impact on sustainable clothes purchasing intentions among Gen Z consumers.

Knowledge Gap and Consumer Awareness Limitations

Although there is growing awareness about the importance of sustainability, many Gen Z consumers do not have adequate knowledge about sustainable fashion. Consumers might favor environmental conservation but do not understand concepts such as ethical sourcing, sustainable certification, carbon footprinting, and production processes involved in the creation of sustainable garments. As a result, consumers cannot distinguish between sustainable clothing brands and those with misleading sustainability marketing campaigns. Consumers tend to act on first impressions based on inadequate information obtained from surface-level research or online social media trends.

According to Kochuveetil et al. (2025), *feelings like being unsure, not having enough information, and wanting convenience, stop people from buying green.* This suggests that addressing the knowledge gap through educational programs, ethical marketing practices would help bridge the gap between what Gen Z wants and their actions when buying things.

Digital Dressing as a Sustainable Solution

Virtual Try-On and Digital Fashion Technology

The emergence of digital dressing has become one of the most promising technological responses to challenges faced in the fashion industry due to sustainability. Using Augmented Reality (AR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), people can now virtually try on clothes before buying them. Platforms such as Snapchat's AR try-on filter, Zalando's virtual fitting room and DressX allow customers to see how clothes would look on them without any physical touch or shipping or handling the product. This addresses one of the most significant challenges faced in the fashion industry: return culture. According to Sharma, president of Perfitly, brands using virtual try-on technology see an average of 64% fewer returns compared to those that do not, alongside conversion rates of up to 80% (as reported in Glossy, 2021).

Poor fit is the main cause of most items being returned; virtual try-on can help people pick the right size from the start. This also further reduces waste and carbon emissions from reverse logistics. For Gen Z, digital try-ons are particularly well-positioned as a solution since they have grown up with AR filters, social media aesthetics and digital self-presentation. This connects what Gen Z wants that is good looking outfits in synchronization with sustainability goals that the planet needs. By using this solution, people can be creative and fashionable online without purchasing lots of things that end up as waste and returning items.

Looking ahead, virtual dressing tech could really change how we buy fashion. Companies like DRESSX have shown that it's possible to get rid of physical production, shipping, and returns altogether. This means less textile waste, fewer CO₂ emissions, and saved water too. In the next few years, the fashion world might shift towards full circularity. This is where AI and AR play big roles in making clothing used, reused, and recycled. Digital dressing would then become an essential part of sustainable fashion rather than just some quirky thing.

Sustainable Fashion Brands Preferred by Gen Z

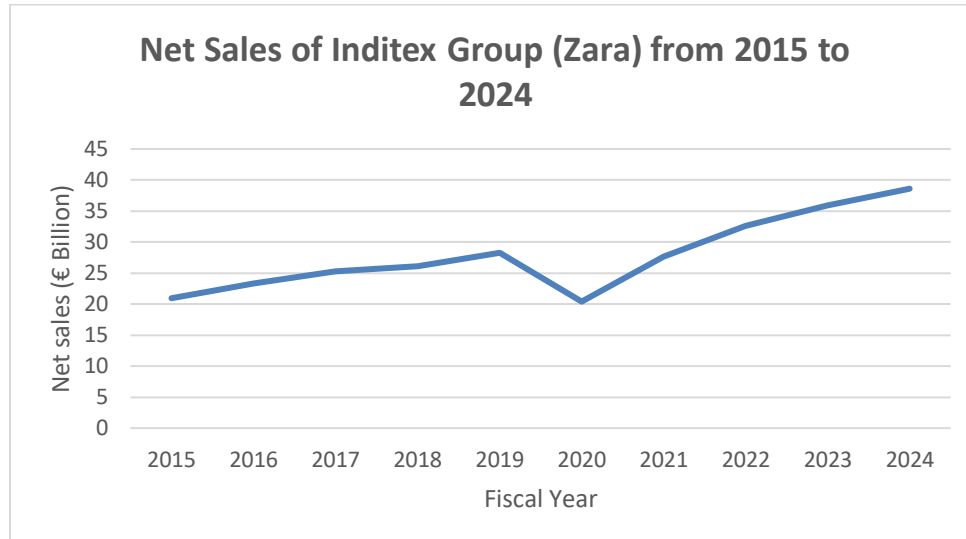
To keep up with the concept of sustainable fashion, brands like Zara and H&M have added green practices to their businesses, even though they're known for quick-changing trends. They try to balance trendiness with values such as environmental responsibility, ethical production, and transparency, further helping in maintaining their strong presence in the fashion industry.

Table 2- Net Sales of Inditex Group (Zara) from 2015 to 2024 (worldwide)

Fiscal Year	Net sales (€ Billion)
2015	20.9
2016	23.3
2017	25.3
2018	26.1
2019	28.3
2020	20.4
2021	27.7
2022	32.6
2023	35.9
2024	38.6

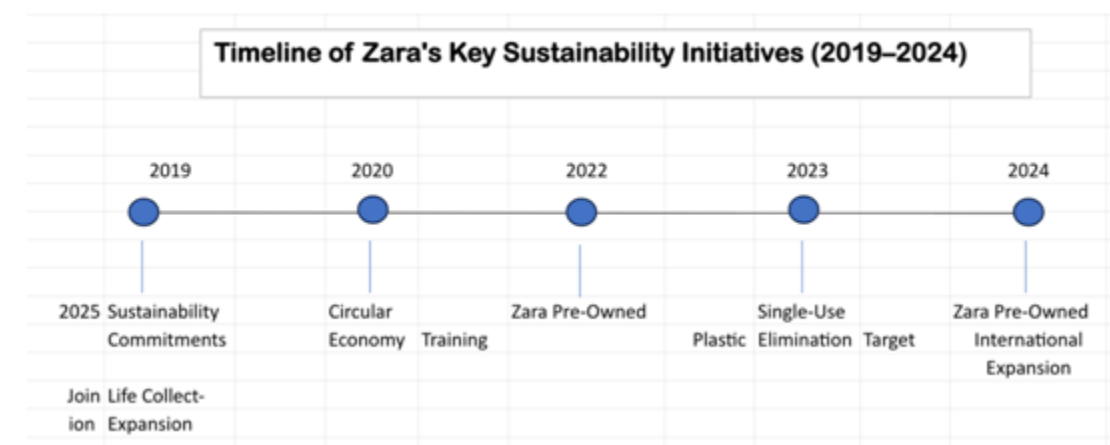
Source-<https://www.inditex.com/itxcomweb/us/en/investors/finance>
<https://www.annualreports.com/Company/inditex>

Graph 3- Net Sales of Inditex Group (Zara) from 2015 to 2024



As seen in the above table and graph, there is a growth in the net sales from €20.9 billion in 2015 to €38.6 billion in 2024, resulting in the overall growth of about 85% for Zara. The brand has been steadily growing in its sales from €35.9 billion in 2023 to €38.6 billion in 2024. This growth might be related to the sustainability efforts made by Zara like the introduction of Join Life collection and clothing recycling programs launched in 2016, since Generation Z people are fond of sustainability products. A decline in sales has been observed in 2020 because of the outbreak of COVID-19, but a fast recovery has been seen in 2021, with net sales being €27.7 billion in 2021 and further growing in 2022.

Zara's Sustainability timeline



The above timeline illustrates the development of the sustainability initiatives of Zara from 2019 to 2024. It shows Zara's shift towards sustainable and circular fashion. It began with the Sustainability Commitments and the Join Life collection. This was followed by the Circular Economy Training Programme and the Zara Pre-Owned programme. In 2024, Zara Pre-Owned expanded internationally. At present, the generation of environmentally aware Generation Z consumers prefers to purchase products from companies that take sustainability seriously. Therefore, the initiatives mentioned above may help the brand attract environmentally aware consumers.

Conclusion and the Way Ahead

The Generation Z consumer behavior in the sustainable fashion industry has been determined through several factors, which include awareness about environment issues, influence by social media, peer influence, financial considerations, ethics and transparency, fashion trends, and identity formation. Despite Generation Z's being greatly concerned about sustainability, ethical consumption, and other aspects related to their purchasing decisions, they still find themselves pursuing fast fashion lifestyle due to practical reasons that include high costs, social pressures, and ever-changing fashion trends.

Based on this research, sustainable fashion companies must ensure a balance between affordability, transparency, fashion trends, and ethical concerns to ensure that they can be able to influence Gen Z consumers.

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