Building Sustainable Communities: How clothing start-ups can engage Gen Z through online communities and sustainable Branding Strategies

Orfeas Jordan Antoniadis S6077420
Sustainable Entrepreneurship Project (SEP) Thesis
Email: o.i.antoniadis@student.rug.nl
Word Count: 8781

Date of submission: 5/6/2025

University of Groningen, Campus Fryslân
Leeuwarden,
The Netherlands

Supervisor: Emma C. Folmer

Abstract

The following thesis explores how sustainable clothing start-ups can use sustainability driven strategies on digital platforms to effectively persuade Gen Z consumers and manage to foster loyal online communities. Responding to a growing demand for authenticity and environmental responsibility among younger consumers, this study adopts a positivist epistemological stance and employs a quantitative methodology. There are structured polls which were distributed to two distinct Gen Z communities: one based around a football themed clothing brand (Lqst.files), and the other around a health conscious food brand cuisine (Zoe Food Co.). Findings from a total of 159 complete responses revealed a high level of sustainability awareness but also significant skepticism toward brand claims. Conditional loyalty emerged as a key theme: sustainability alone was insufficient to secure engagement unless aligned with personal style or content preferences. Advocacy potential was notable, with over 40% of participants in both communities expressing willingness to promote sustainable brands, especially when tied to the product's quality, storytelling, or values. This thesis concludes that successful brand strategies must combine visual/aesthetic appeal with transparent and credible sustainability efforts. Afterwards, practical recommendations are offered for start-ups aiming to bridge the gap between values and action in Gen Z engagement. Limitations related to sampling and platform specific biases are also acknowledged, and finally the study reflects on the challenges and insights gained through a transdisciplinary collaboration with real world brand communities.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction..... 1
1.1. Context and state of the art.....1
2. Methodology - Methods.....8
3. Results and findings.....13
4. Discussion..... 19
5. Conclusion and Recommendations.....22
6. Limitations and Reflection..... 24
Appendices.....27
Reference List..... 30

1 Introduction

1.1. Context and state of the art

Gen Z is often depicted as an environmentally conscious and ethically driven generation, showing a strong preference for brands that align with their values. However, studies show that their actual purchasing behaviors often contradict these stated values (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). This contradiction is known as the “Value Action Gap“ and it can be attributed to multiple factors such as, economic uncertainty, fast-paced trend cycles, and difficulty of accessing affordable sustainable options (Williams et al, 2020). Additionally, the current state with unstable job markets, rising living costs, and financial insecurity, makes it even more challenging. Lastly, this culture of rapid consumption, which is fueled by social media trends and influencer marketing, creates pressure to keep up with new styles and that disrupts sustainability efforts (Henninger & Athwal, 2022).

Simultaneously, in this dynamic landscape, online communities have emerged as crucial spaces where Gen Z form opinions through discussions about identity, values, and consumer choices. Start-ups who aim to develop sustainable branding strategies must consider not just the appeal of sustainability but also how to effectively position themselves within these digital spaces in order to foster brand loyalty and encourage sustainable behaviors. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the following research question: “How can sustainable clothing start-ups use sustainability-driven strategies on digital platforms to persuade Gen Z consumers and foster a loyal online community?”

The most efficient way to understand the significance of this research is by first examining the importance of sustainable business practices and then focusing specifically on Sustainability in clothing/streetwear start-up companies, the role of online communities, and the difference that exists between Gen Z and previous generations. Analyzing these elements will help identify the gap my research question aims to cover.

Sustainability & Clothing Industry

Sustainability currently is vital, for businesses, the environment, and society, as it mitigates risks, ensures long-term profitability, and meets growing consumer and investor demands for ethical practices (Winit & Kantabutra,2023). For business it has become a critical strategic priority, particularly in industries with significant environmental and social impact, such as the clothing industry.

In the clothing industry, sustainability is crucial for businesses since many unsustainable practices contribute significantly to environmental and social challenges. For instance, the clothing industry alone is responsible for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of global wastewater production (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022). The industry also generates 92 million tons of textile waste annually, exacerbating landfill overflow and microplastic pollution in oceans (Igini, 2023). Furthermore, several clothing companies like Zara or Shein have been accused of having unethical labor practices. For example, when Shein was investigated in 2023, they found two instances of child labor in its supply chain and it was also revealed that factory workers work up to 75 hours every week while they earn less than 1 cent per garment (Andrews, 2025). All these factors clearly highlight the need for sustainable business strategies in this industry.

In the last few years, sustainability has shifted from being a peripheral concern to a strategic imperative in the clothing and streetwear industry. This shift is especially relevant for start-ups, which must now also navigate increasing regulatory demands and changing consumer expectations. Sustainability, which was at one point a marketing afterthought, has now evolved to a point where emerging brands are being pushed to integrate sustainable practices at the core of their business models to remain competitive, build trust, and respond to the values of the younger generations (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Studies show that 73% of Gen Z consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable products, making sustainability a powerful tool or even an opportunity for businesses to meet the customer needs and values and build brand loyalty and market differentiation (First Insight, 2020). Moreover, frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and EU Green Deal impose stricter regulations on businesses, requiring compliance with circular economy principles, eco-friendly supply chains, and reduced carbon footprints (European Commission, 2023). The brands that integrate circular fashion models, transparent communication, ethical sourcing or any other sustainable branding strategy, can enhance their brand credibility and contribute to a systematic change within the industry (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Focus on Start-ups

According to research and my personal experience sustainability is often most effective when it is integrated from the very first steps of a company's development, to what scholars refer as "born sustainable" enterprises (Winit, Kantabutra, & Kantabutra, 2023; Golob et al., 2022). The main reason for this is, that Start-ups, unlike established companies, have the strategic advantage of embedding sustainability into their core identity, operations, and value propositions from the very first day of a business. This foundational approach gives them the ability to truly align more authentically with the values of Gen Z consumers, who prioritize

transparency, ethics, and environmental impact. Studies also show that start-ups who have a clear sustainability narrative are more likely to resonate with younger audiences and foster brand loyalty through purpose driven communication (Chaudhri, Pridmore, & Mauck, 2022). This point leads me directly to the next focus area which is the focus on sustainable branding and Gen Z consumers.

Sustainable Branding, Gen Z Preferences, Online Community-Building & Start-Ups

Generation Z represents a new wave of consumers whose expectations and behaviors are redefining how brands should and must operate in the digital spaces. Based on an analysis of United Nations data, Gen Z accounted for over 32% of the global population as of 2019 (Bloomberg, 2018), making them a demographic that brands cannot afford to overlook. Gen Z is not only digitally native but also socially and environmentally conscious, with strong preferences for brands that reflect their values. Their core expectations sustainability, authenticity, and transparency, shape how they interact with businesses, particularly through online platforms and social media communities where they voice opinions, challenge marketing narratives, and reward ethical behavior. Quite important to acknowledge is that around 70–75% of all users in online communities are Gen Z, making these digital spaces crucial for brand engagement and community building strategies (Hanson, 2018). This presents both an opportunity and a challenge for start-up clothing brands seeking to build brand loyalty in a very saturated and competitive environment. The following literature review will explore Gen Z's consumer identity, digital behaviors, and the strategic role of online communities and sustainability-driven branding in shaping engagement and loyalty.

Literature Review

The intersection among sustainable branding for start-ups, Gen Z consumer behavior, and online communities is a growing area of interest within business literature. While sustainability has become an important value proposition for brands, its function in shaping consumer engagement and community building specifically among Gen Z, remains underexplored.

Sustainable Branding & Gen Z Consumer Values

Gen Z or Generation Z is referring to those born between 1997 and 2012 and it is a generation driven by values such as sustainability, authenticity, transparency, diversity, inclusivity and connectedness (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). These values are quite contrasting to those from previous generations, Millennials, Gen X etc. who were generally more focused on brand loyalty, price sensitivity and convenience rather than ethical or environmental impact (Williams et al. 2020). It is important to recognize that Gen Z is a

diverse group, and not all individuals within it share the same priorities or behaviors. However, research indicates that on average, Gen Z consumers place greater importance on ethical and environmental considerations, especially when interacting with brands (Henninger, 2022). The presence of the internet played a pivotal role in shaping the minds of Gen Z since it was easily accessible since birth. This constant connectivity has heightened Gen Z's awareness of global problems like climate change, labor rights etc. (Salam et al., 2024). Furthermore, it has been revealed that Gen Z tends to examine brands closely, paying close attention to the environmental and social impact. Studies have indicated that when Gen Z consumers consider a brand as unsustainable, unauthentic or not transparent enough, they tend to voice their concerns on online platforms and social media communities to alert others, state their complaints and criticize the brand (Schwarz, 2024). For instance, Pradhan et al. (2023) found that Gen Z consumers tend to avoid influencers and endorsed brands when they perceive excessive brand control, viewing it as morally irresponsible. This behavior underscores the importance for brands to maintain authenticity and transparency in their marketing strategies to foster trust and loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

Sustainable branding has been recognized as a powerful differentiator in branding that enables companies to attract the increasingly environmentally conscious consumers (Palomo-Domínguez, 2023; Winit et al., 2023). However, it is important to distinguish between companies that integrate sustainability as a core organizational value and those that use sustainability primarily as a marketing strategy. For example, brands such as Patagonia exemplify the former, embedding environmental and ethical principles into their operations, supply chains, and brand identity from the outset (Technology and Operations management, 2015). In contrast, most other firms may adopt only surface level sustainable messaging to capitalize on market trends without demonstrating genuine commitment and this practise can risk accusations of greenwashing or virtue signaling (Kurpierz & Smith, 2020; Türkmen & Akman, 2023)

Digital Natives & Online Engagement

As earlier mentioned, the internet plays a crucial impact in shaping Gen Z's consumer behavior. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z are Digital Natives**,** meaning that they grew up fully immersed with the internet from a very young age. This familiarity with digital and online environments allows them to seamlessly integrate into online ecosystems, making social media platforms and online communities, key influences in shaping their perceptions of brands and sustainability. This digital nativeness also fosters high levels of participation in online interactions, including engaging in peer discussion and contributing with viral trends (Chang & Chang, 2023). The constant digital engagement in the online landscapes where Gen Z users

actively question, challenge and demand accountability from brands has led to an increase in consumer awareness and the need for brands to be more transparent (Hanson, 2018). Gen Z's reliance on digital means to express their views and connect with brands further reinforces the importance of a strong digital presence for any business (Cheng F, 2018). The significance of online communities increases in a daily rate, making it necessary for businesses to master this dynamic. As Gen Z gains more purchasing power, their influence on the consumer market will continue to grow, reinforcing the need for brands to adapt to the new era's expectations (Golob, 2022).

This makes it crucial for every business and especially a start-up, to understand how to engage with these online communities and cater to them. According to research a statistic that makes this point crystal clear is that around 70–75% of all users in online communities are Gen Z (Hanson, 2018). From this we can understand that it is crucial for brands to learn how to build, manage and influence online communities not just to ensure future success, but the company's survival since through these online communities and platforms, they have direct access and influence on their current and future customers and supporters (Hanson, 2018). This point leads me to the fourth and final area of focus of this research which is online communities.

Online Community Building & Start-Ups

In this day and age, online community building is a cornerstone of successful start-ups, especially in these highly competitive sectors of clothing/streetwear brands. A community can be generally defined as a group of individuals who share common interests, values, or goals, and engage in ongoing interactions (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000). Important to distinguish is that traditional communities were often place based, such as neighborhoods or local organizations. However, the rise of digital platforms such as social media, has given way for online communities to form, where members interact in virtual spaces, forming connections beyond just geographical constraints (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). In this modern world where digital presence is key, building a concrete strong online community is not an option, but a necessity. Start-ups must use social media platforms to create a brand, engage with people and spread their message to develop a community and a truly loyal client base (Amadeo Moreno, 2022-2023).

Case Study: The Nude Project

One example of successful alignment with Gen Z values is the **Nude Project**, a Spanish streetwear brand that has built a strong community by centering its branding on authenticity and transparency. Their use of storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and brand values like

“Made in Spain” and inclusive imagery have helped them resonate with young consumers. (Amadeo Moreno, 2022-2023).

Most of the existing research focuses on established brands rather than small start-ups that are operating in niche markets like football streetwear. While large corporations have the resources to integrate sustainability at scale, start-ups must balance ethical production with affordability, a challenge that remains underexplored in literature (Chaudhri, 2022).

Specifically, research on sustainability as a tool for online community-building is still in its early stages. While it is acknowledged that digital platforms facilitate consumer engagement, studies rarely address how sustainability itself can serve as a key motivator for community building and engagement (Hanson, 2018). Given that Gen Z’s brand loyalty is often built through digital spaces, there is a need to investigate how sustainable start-ups can embed sustainability into these online interactions in ways that go beyond simple marketing campaigns.

Important to mention is that While Gen Z expresses strong environmental and ethical concerns, their purchasing decisions frequently contradict these values (Williams et al., 2020). According to research scholars this discrepancy is referred to as the “Value Action Gap” and they suggest that this inconsistency is not due to a lack of interest but rather a combination of social, economic, and psychological factors. The higher price tag sustainable products often carry, makes them less accessible to the Gen Z who are dealing with student debt, job insecurity and high living costs (Vivek, 2024). Additionally, there is social pressure and trend-driven consumption which is pushed through social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok. On these platforms fast fashion brands such as Zara exploit the dynamic of short-lived fashion cycles, encouraging rapid turnover rather than mindful consumption, offering low cost alternatives that are difficult to resist for the Gen Z demographic (Amadeo Moreno, 2023). These challenges raise important questions about how clothing start-ups can engage Gen Z with sustainability in a way that goes beyond ethical obligation and becomes part of their everyday lifestyle.

Greenwashing closely resembles fraud as it refers to the process of misleading customers about the environmental benefits of a product or practice, often by exaggerating or fabricating sustainability claims. This practise is regarded as deceptive and it doesn’t only undermine genuine sustainability efforts but also manages to damage brand credibility when consumers uncover the truth (Kurpierz & Smith, 2020)

Virtue signaling, on the other hand refers to the act of displaying one's moral values in order to gain social approval rather than from a place of genuine commitment. In sustainability marketing, this can specifically occur when brands overemphasize ethical messages to appear socially responsible, without backing them up with meaningful actions (Türkmen & Akman, 2023). This perception can lead to consumer backlash, especially among Gen Z audiences who are known to be highly critical of inauthentic or performative behavior online.

Additionally, the role of online communities in shaping brand equity for clothing start-ups is proving to be very important. Studies indicate that strong online communities can accelerate business growth (Amadeo Moreno, 2022-2023), but little is known about how start-ups can build loyalty through sustainability focused communities.

While the influence of online communities on Gen Z consumer behavior has been acknowledged earlier, their specific function within sustainable branding strategies remains underexplored (Cheng, 2018). Research acknowledges that social media platforms, reputation systems, and peer-to-peer networks can enhance customer engagement, but little is known about how these tools can be leveraged specifically in the context of sustainable branding. There are a few studies suggesting that Gen Z's digital habits can be harnessed to promote sustainable consumer behaviors, for example, through gamification, peer influence, and user-generated content. For instance, gamification strategies have been shown to effectively engage Gen Z consumers in sustainable decision-making processes (Hoang et al., 2024). Additionally, user generated content on social media platforms has proven to significantly impact Gen Z's purchase intentions towards sustainable fashion and that highlights the power of digital engagement in promoting sustainability (El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025). However, there is still a need to investigate which digital strategies are most effective for engaging Gen Z with sustainability without alienating them through excessive virtue signaling or greenwashing claims.

The critical gap this research aims to fill is that while there is literature on Gen Z's consumer habits, sustainable branding, and online communities, these fields have rarely been examined together in the context of start-ups. The key challenge for sustainable start-ups is not only how to position themselves as eco-friendly brands, but how to create digital spaces where Gen Z consumers feel included and actively engaged in sustainability rather than passively marketed to it. In order to achieve this target, the study aims to answer the following research question:

This holistic approach is critical for bridging the disconnect between sustainable branding, online communities and consumer behavior in the start-up context.

2 Methodology - Methods

For the research question: ***"How can sustainable clothing start-ups use sustainability-driven strategies on digital platforms to persuade Gen Z consumers and foster a loyal online community ? "*** I will use a quantitative methodological approach to explore how sustainable clothing start-ups can use digital sustainable branding strategies to engage Generation Z and build loyal online communities. The decision to use a purely quantitative method was based on the nature of the research question, which required measurable data on behavioral trends, perceptions, and preferences within specific Gen Z communities.

To properly answer this research question we must divided into 4 Sub-Questions:

1. What sustainability driven strategies are currently used by clothing start-ups to engage Gen Z online?
2. How does Gen Z perceive sustainability related messaging on digital platforms?
3. What role does sustainability play in Gen Z's decision to engage with or stay loyal to an online clothing brand community?
4. How do sustainable branding efforts influence Gen Z's willingness to become brand advocates within digital communities?

Epistemology - Positivist Approach

This research adopts a positivist epistemological position, which aligns with the use of quantitative methods to explore observable patterns and behaviors. Positivism emphasizes objectivity, measurability, and the use of empirical evidence to understand social phenomena (Creswell, 2009). Given that the aim of this study is to identify trends and preferences in Gen Z's response to sustainable branding strategies, a positivist stance is appropriate. The data collected through structured polls is treated as measurable input, allowing the researcher to uncover statistically significant insights about consumer behavior. While social and cultural context is acknowledged, the goal is not to interpret individual experiences in depth, but rather to assess patterns across a broader population sample. This approach supports the investigation of generalizable trends that can inform strategic decisions for clothing start-ups seeking to build loyal online communities through sustainability driven branding.

Quantitative Approach

I'm planning on a quantitative approach also to identify patterns and statistically significant factors that influence Gen Z engagement with sustainable brands. Data was collected via structured polls administered across two distinct Gen Z communities. The first one is from a football page on social media called "Lqst.files", which includes mostly football and

clothing/streetwear enthusiasts. The second community is a food oriented community tied to a health focused cuisine brand based in London by the name" Zoe Food Co", where survey links were distributed via email to existing customers.

Each community was asked the same set of multiple choice questions, aligned with the thesis sub-questions. Their responses were measured as percentages per option and accompanied by basic demographic data (e.g., age, gender, nationality) visible through platform analytics or customer profiles.

2.1. Methodological approach

Following the literature review, which was conducted using a narrative approach to identify patterns and conceptual frameworks relevant to the research question (Ferrari, 2015), a quantitative methodological approach was employed to collect and analyze empirical data. Specifically, structured polls were distributed to two targeted Gen Z communities: one built around a football-focused clothing brand (Lqst.files), and the other around a health-conscious food brand (Zoe Food Co.). These communities consisted of followers and active participants within the respective brands' social media platforms, including Email, Instagram and WhatsApp group chats. Members of these communities are mainly aged between 18 and 27, self identify with Gen Z cultural values, and regularly engage with the brand through comments, reactions, story interactions and community group chats. The access to the polls was limited to individuals within these digital spaces, ensuring that only those who were already part of the brand's audience or ecosystem could respond. This inclusion criterion was necessary to help maintain demographic alignment with the research target group. No external participants were recruited outside these platforms. These polls were designed to align directly with the study's research sub-questions and focused on perceptions of sustainable branding, brand loyalty, and community engagement (Creswell, 2009). The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to uncover trends in Gen Z consumer behavior in response to sustainability driven branding strategies on digital platforms.

2.1.1 Data Collection

The data collection process followed these steps:

1. **Poll Design:** Based on the sub-questions of the research, structured polls were created using multiple-choice formats. Each question corresponded to a key theme such as awareness, perception, loyalty, and advocacy around sustainable branding.On social media platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, polls are typically used as informal tools for establishing a closer connection with your supporters/customers, engaging audiences, gathering feedback, or prompting quick user interaction. Even though they are not traditionally designed for academic research, they offer a unique opportunity for real time data collection within naturally

occurring digital communities. In this study, polls were repurposed as a research instrument to collect quantifiable data in a manner that was accessible and familiar to the Gen Z respondents. The specific format was chosen for its ability to quickly reach a large number of participants within their natural native digital environment, while still aligning each question directly with the research sub objectives.

2. **Distribution Channels:** The distribution channels are polls posted in Instagram community chats for the Lqst.files football audience. Respectively also Identical poll questions were emailed to a curated list of Gen Z customers from a food-based brand cuisine to capture behavioral parallels in another lifestyle sector.
3. **Participant Demographics:** On social media, participants' age, gender, and nationality were inferred from platform data. In the food community, emails were linked to basic customer profiles, allowing for the same demographic insights.
4. **Data Aggregation & Analysis:** The poll results were aggregated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages were used to identify patterns in the responses. Excel was chosen for its availability, accessibility and efficiency in organizing and calculating basic statistical outputs which is suitable for this scale of data. Patterns were compared across both communities to observe consistencies or differences in Gen Z responses.
5. **Data Integration and Interpretation:** Responses from both football and food communities were compared and cross analyzed to uncover similarities and differences in Gen Z perceptions across two lifestyle sectors (fashion and food). The aim was to interpret these trends in the context of the research question, identifying what sustainability strategies resonate most and how sustainable branding efforts can influence online community engagement and loyalty. These insights will guide the formulation of practical recommendations for clothing start-ups.

Response Rate and Potential Bias

The polls were distributed to two targeted Gen Z communities: a football-focused clothing community and a health-conscious food community. In the football community, which included approximately 1,800 members, a total of 93 complete responses were collected. While the initial response count was lower (61), additional participants were engaged through direct messages to ensure better representation. Only those who responded to all polls were included in the final dataset, as partial responses were not consistently useful for comparative analysis. The majority of this community consisted of males, which may have influenced the nature of the responses, particularly in terms of engagement with sustainability themes. In contrast, the Zoe food community involved a targeted email approach to approximately 150 Gen Z customers, resulting in 66 full responses. These participants were

more easily mobilized and consistently answered all poll questions. However, given that the Zoe community is composed of health-conscious individuals, it is possible that their awareness of and sensitivity toward sustainability issues may have introduced a degree of attitudinal bias.

Furthermore, self selection bias may be present, as those who chose to participate, especially after direct prompting, may have been more opinionated or engaged with the topic than those who did not respond. Nonresponse bias may also influence the findings, particularly if the views of the non respondents differ meaningfully from those who chose to engage with the poll. Acknowledging these potential biases is important for interpreting the results with appropriate caution and transparency (Qualtrics, n.d.).

Additionally, the football community had a more global participant base (Europe, North America, Asia, Africa), while the food community was primarily UK-based. This broader reach allowed for geographical diversity, but may have introduced uneven familiarity with sustainability concepts, especially due to differences in digital access and environmental discourse exposure.

Instruments

Digital Polls: Nine structured poll questions were developed and distributed to each community, resulting in a total of 18 questions. Each set was tailored to the same sub-questions, allowing comparison between two distinct Gen Z groups. The football community was contacted through the chats from the Lqst.files clothing/streetwear social media platform, while the food community was contacted through an Email-based distribution to Gen Z customers of a food and health cuisine brand.

For example, one of the questions asked: *"How often do you consider a brand's sustainability practices when deciding to make a purchase?" with multiple-choice options ranging from "Always" to "Never."*

Poll Phrasing Justification

The phrasing and content for the poll questions were carefully developed to align with the study's sub-questions and the themes identified during the literature review. Specifically, the sustainability strategies included in the awareness and perception questions specifically were selected based on a combination of academic sources and personal entrepreneurial experience. Strategies such as circular fashion, ethical sourcing, transparent communication, and eco-friendly packaging were consistently cited across the literature as key pillars of sustainable branding (Palomo-Domínguez, 2023; Golob et al., 2022; Winit et al., 2023).

However, personal insight from running a brand also played a role in selecting and phrasing the strategies in a way that felt relevant and understandable to Gen Z customers on digital platforms. This hybrid approach ensured that the poll questions reflected both theoretical robustness and practical relevance for the target demographic.

Answer Options & Data Format: Each poll included multiple choice answers (typically A–D). The responses were collected in percentage format and translated to approximate participant counts.

Demographic Capture: Social media platform data revealed participant demographics such as age range, sex, and nationality. While the Email based responses included demographics via customer records or direct replies.

Data Management: Results were collected directly from my social media poll tools and email responses. The data was then organized manually, with percentage based outcomes used to assess trends across different questions and communities. Given the quantitative and exploratory nature of the study, analysis focused on descriptive statistics, such as response frequencies and percentage distributions, rather than advanced inferential methods.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

Ethical concern is an essential factor in the execution of this research on sustainable branding strategies and Gen Z online community engagement in order to protect the participant's right and maintain the reliability of the research. The following measures will be taken to address ethical concerns:

1. Informed Consent: All participants will be given a detailed information sheet that contains the purpose of the research, the methods that will be used, and the rights of the participants. Written or digital consent will be procured from each participant prior to their participation in the study.

2. Anonymity and Confidentiality: The identity of the participants will not be disclosed in any of the research outputs. The data collected shall be secured by storing it on encrypted devices and only the researcher shall be allowed to view the data. When any data is presented in publications or presentations the data will be aggregated and anonymized.

3. Data Security: The data will be stored using password protected systems. The raw data will be accessible to only the researcher to ensure that the privacy of the participants is not violated at any stage of the research.

4. Avoiding Harm: All the measures will be taken to ensure that no participants suffer from any kind of psychological, emotional or social distress in the process. The questions in interviews and surveys will be framed in a way that does not raise sensitive or uncomfortable issues.

5. Ethical Committee Approval: The detailed proposal will be presented to the ethical committee of the university to get approval for the data collection. It will contain all the necessary paperwork like the informed consent form, participant information sheet, the research tools, the interview guides, survey questionnaires etc.

6. Transparency and Accountability: The participants will also have an option of withdrawing from the study at any time without any repercussions. They will also be told how the data will be used, and they will be provided with a summary of the findings if they request it.

By adhering to these ethical guidelines, this study aims to maintain the highest standards of research integrity, ensuring the well-being and rights of all participants are respected.

3 RESULTS & FINDINGS

This section of the thesis presents the results of the empirical research conducted through structured polls among two different Gen Z communities: the first is a football focused clothing/streetwear audience with a total of 93 respondents, and the second is a food oriented, health conscious community with 66 respondents. The findings are organized according to the four core sub-questions of the study. Each sub-question was addressed through multiple poll items (e.g., Sub-question 1 includes Polls 1.1 and 1.2), allowing for a more detailed exploration of key dimensions such as sustainability awareness, perception, loyalty, and brand advocacy. These results represent raw data presentation and do not yet offer interpretation, which will follow in the next section of this thesis.

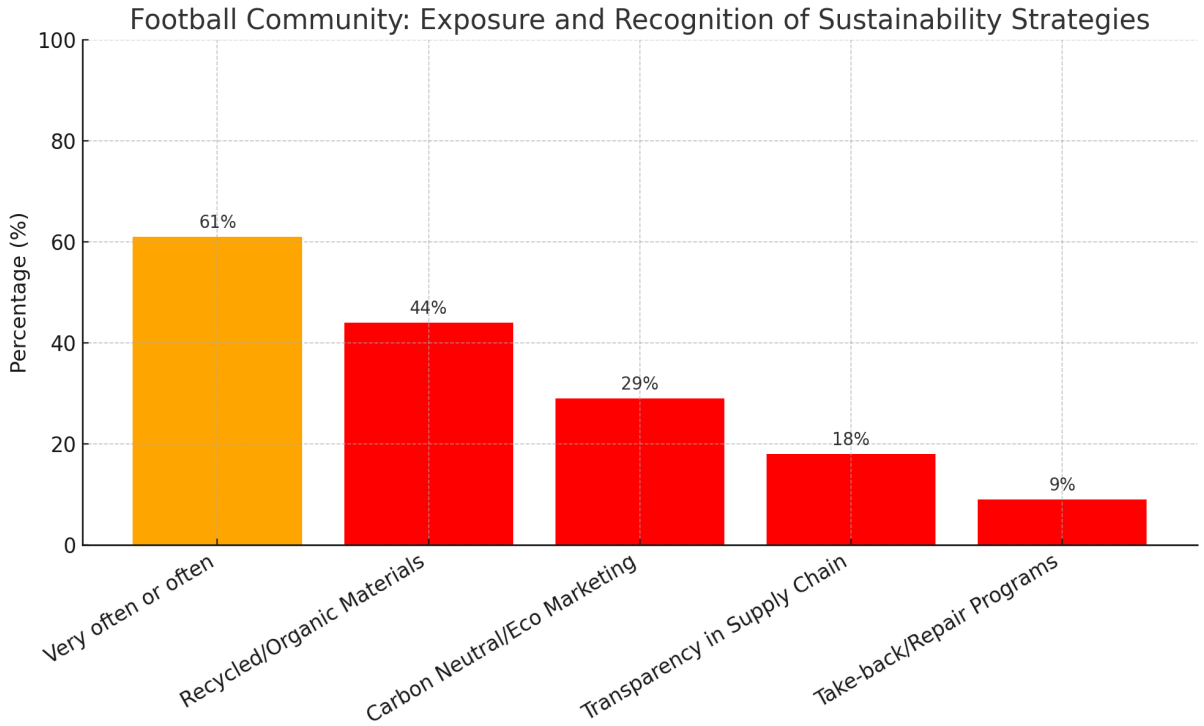
Firstly the results and findings from the football community are presented and afterwards the results from the food community.

3.1.1 Awareness of Sustainability Strategies Football (Sub-question 1)

To assess participants' awareness of sustainable branding strategies, they were asked 2 questions found in Appendix A:

Respondents from both communities demonstrated a high level of exposure to sustainability messaging, particularly in relation to materials and production practices. Within the football community, a combined (61%) of participants reported encountering clothing brands that

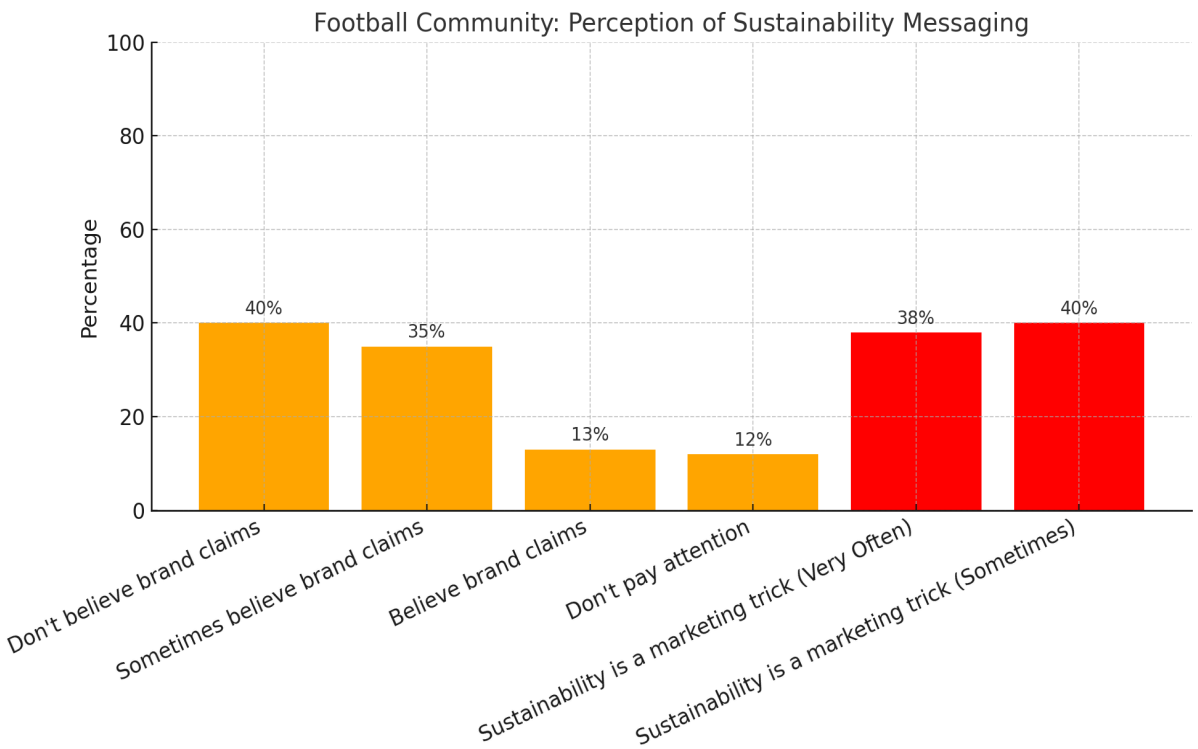
advertised sustainability related claims either "very often" or "often". The most commonly recognized strategies in this group were the use of recycled or organic materials (44%), followed by carbon neutral or eco-friendly marketing (29%), transparency regarding production or supply chains (18%), and take-back or repair programs (9%).



3.1.2 Perception of Sustainability Messaging Football (Sub-question 2)

To assess the perception of sustainable branding strategies, participants were asked 3 questions which can be found in Apendix B.

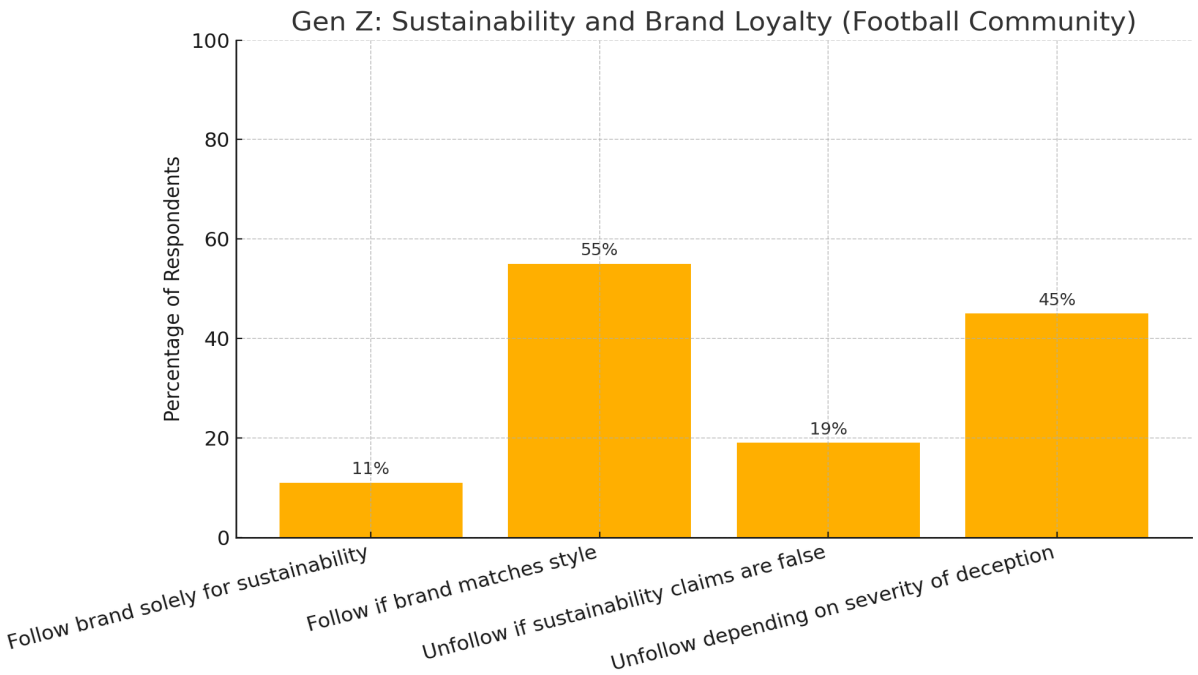
Despite frequent exposure to sustainability claims, a significant level of skepticism was observed in both groups. In the football community, (40%) of respondents stated they do not believe most brands are genuine when discussing sustainability, and an additional (35%) selected "sometimes," suggesting inconsistent trust. Only (13%) expressed clear belief in brand claims, while (12%) admitted not paying attention to such messaging. Furthermore, (38%) stated they felt sustainability was used "very often" as a marketing trick, while (40%) said "sometimes." These responses suggest a perception of sustainability messaging as superficial or insincere.



3.1.3 Loyalty and Engagement with Sustainable Brands Football (Sub-question 3)

To assess the loyalty and engagement of sustainable branding strategies, participants were asked 2 questions found in Appendix C

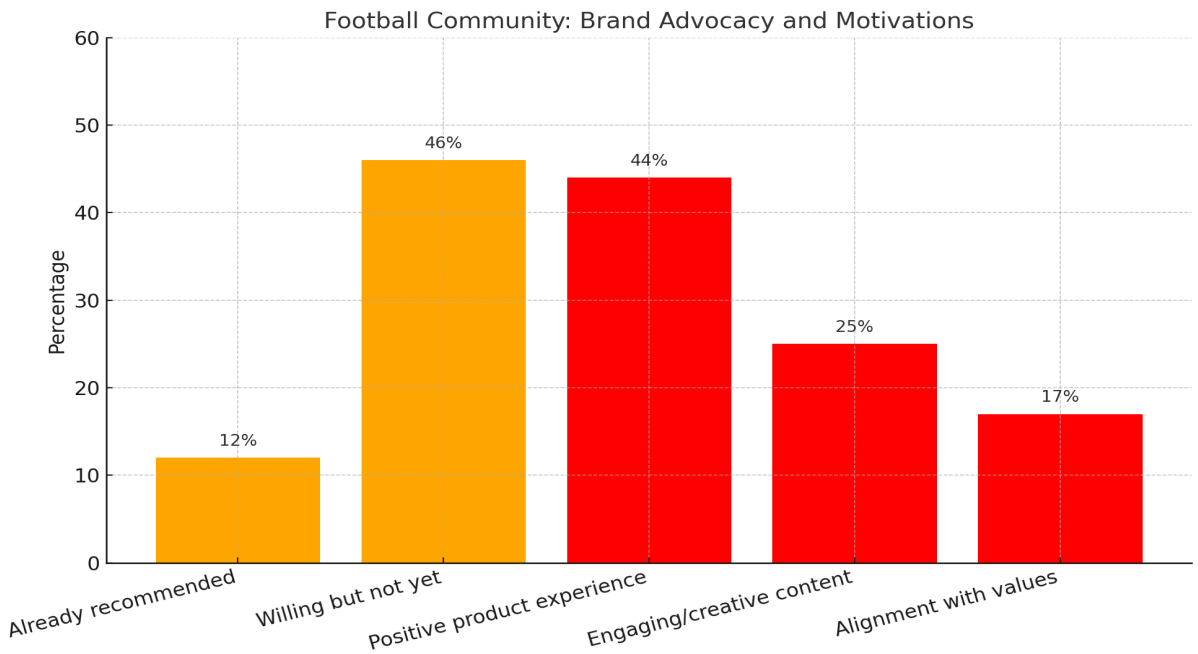
When examining the connection between sustainability and brand loyalty, the results showed that Gen Z's engagement is conditional rather than automatic. In the football community, only (11%) said they would follow a clothing brand solely because it was sustainable. A larger proportion (55%) reported they would engage only if the brand's aesthetic and style aligned with their personal preferences. This trend also carried into their reaction to brand dishonesty. While (19%) said they would unfollow a brand if they discovered its sustainability claims were false, (45%) stated their decision would depend on the severity of the deception, highlighting the role of nuance in consumer disengagement.



3.1.4 Advocacy and Community Participation Football (Sub-question 4)

To assess advocacy potential, participants were asked 2 questions found in Appendix D.

The final sub-question explored the extent to which Gen Z respondents are willing to advocate for or promote sustainable brands within digital communities. In the football community, (12%) had actively recommended a sustainable clothing brand online, while (46%) stated they would be willing to do so, although they had not yet taken action. The strongest motivations for brand advocacy were positive product experiences (44%), engaging or creative content (25%), and alignment with personal values or inspiration from the brand's story (17%).



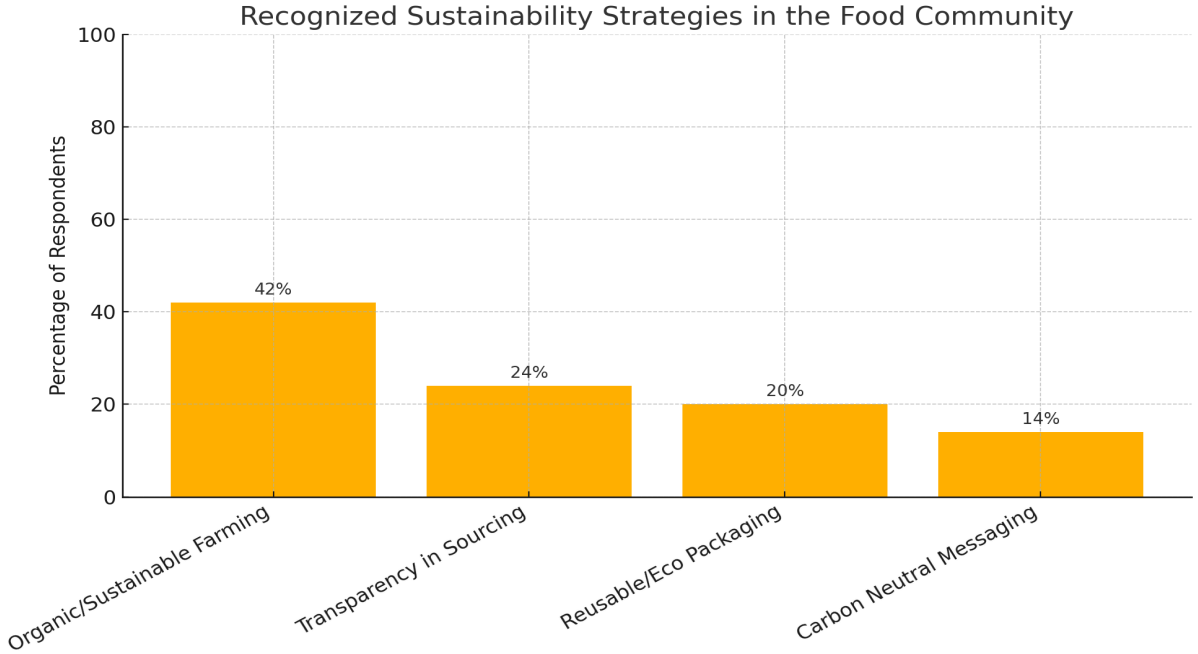
The above findings summarize the responses from the football focused clothing community, highlighting Gen Z attitudes toward sustainable branding within a streetwear clothing context.

The following section now presents the findings from the food oriented Gen Z community, offering insight into sustainability perceptions within a health conscious consumer base.

3.2.1 Awareness of Sustainability Strategies Food (Sub-question 1)

To assess participants' awareness of sustainable branding strategies, they were asked 2 questions found in Appendix E.

Similarly, in the food community, (58%) of respondents indicated frequent exposure to sustainability messaging, particularly related to organic ingredients and packaging. Organic or sustainable farming methods were the most visible strategy, selected by (42%) of participants. This was followed by transparency about sourcing and supply chains (24%), reusable or eco-packaging (20%), and carbon neutral or environmentally friendly messaging (14%). Overall, both communities reported frequent exposure to sustainability campaigns, with material sourcing and organic content being the most memorable and visible aspects

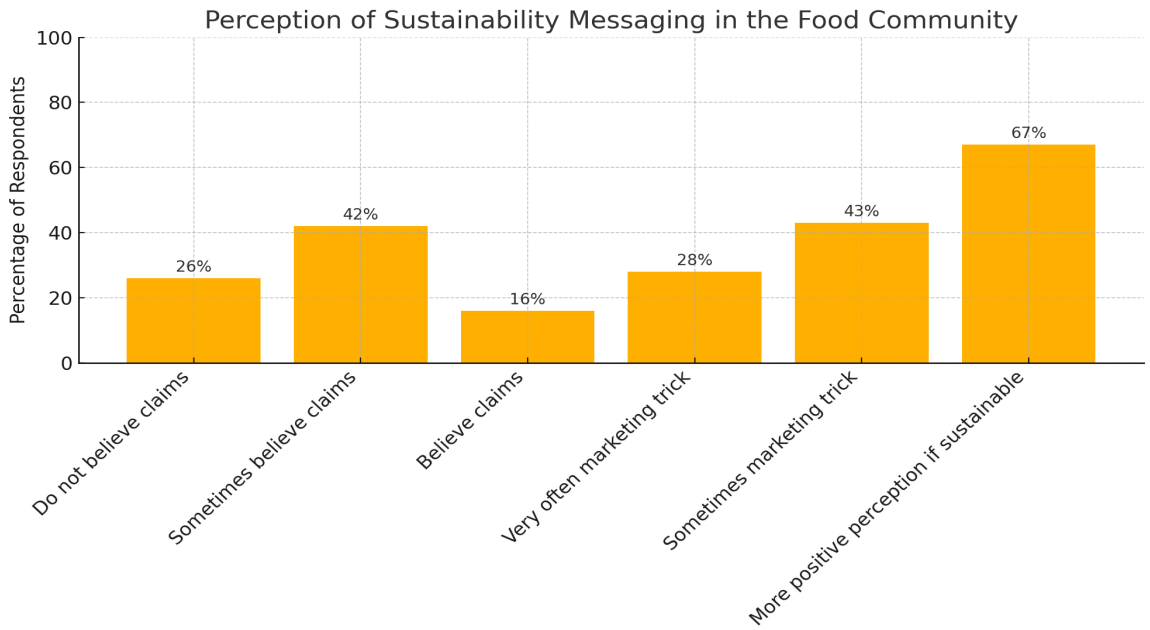


3.2.2 Perception of Sustainability Messaging Food (Sub-question 2)

To assess the perception of sustainable branding strategies, participants were asked 3 questions found in Appendix F.

A similar pattern emerged in the food community. Here, (26%) did not believe food brands are genuine in their sustainability claims, while (42%) selected "sometimes," and only (16%) answered affirmatively. These participants also tended to view sustainability as a strategic communication tool rather than a deeply held brand value, with (28%) believing it is "very often" a marketing tactic, and (43%) indicating "sometimes." Although skepticism was high, participants in both groups reported that sustainability does influence how they feel about a brand. In the football group, (63%) felt more positively toward brands that appeared

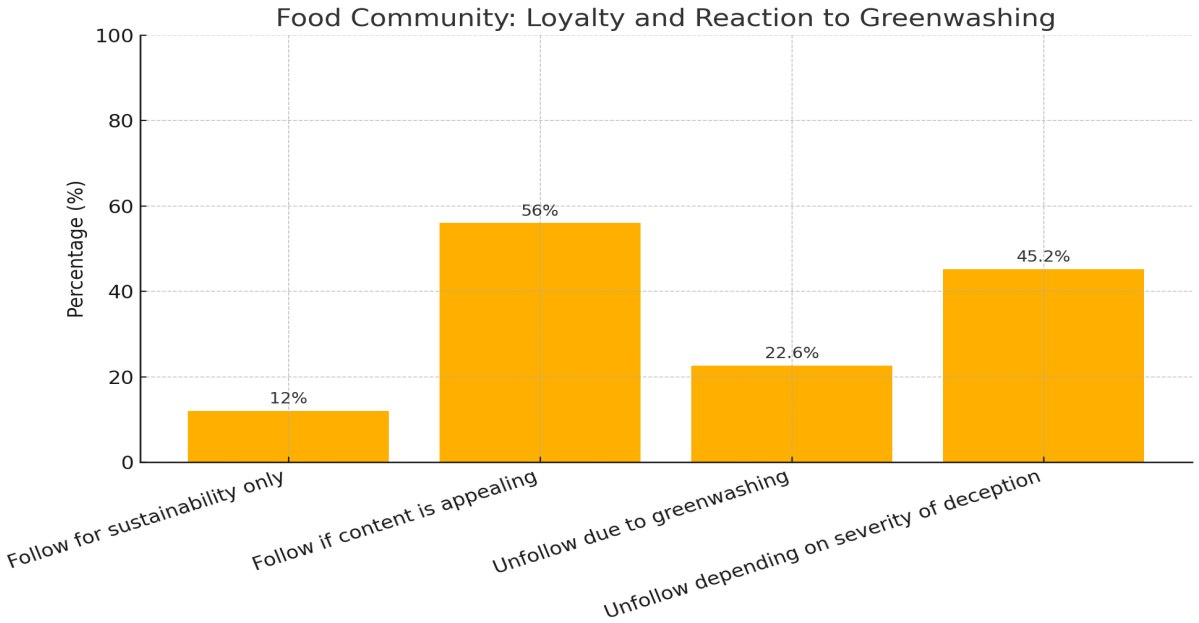
sustainable, especially if they already liked the brand. Similarly, in the food group, (67%) expressed a more favorable perception of brands that incorporate sustainability into their messaging, with the caveat that the message must feel authentic.



3.2.3 Loyalty and Engagement with Sustainable Brands Food (Sub-question 3)

To assess the loyalty and engagement of sustainable branding strategies, participants were asked 2 questions found in Appendix G.

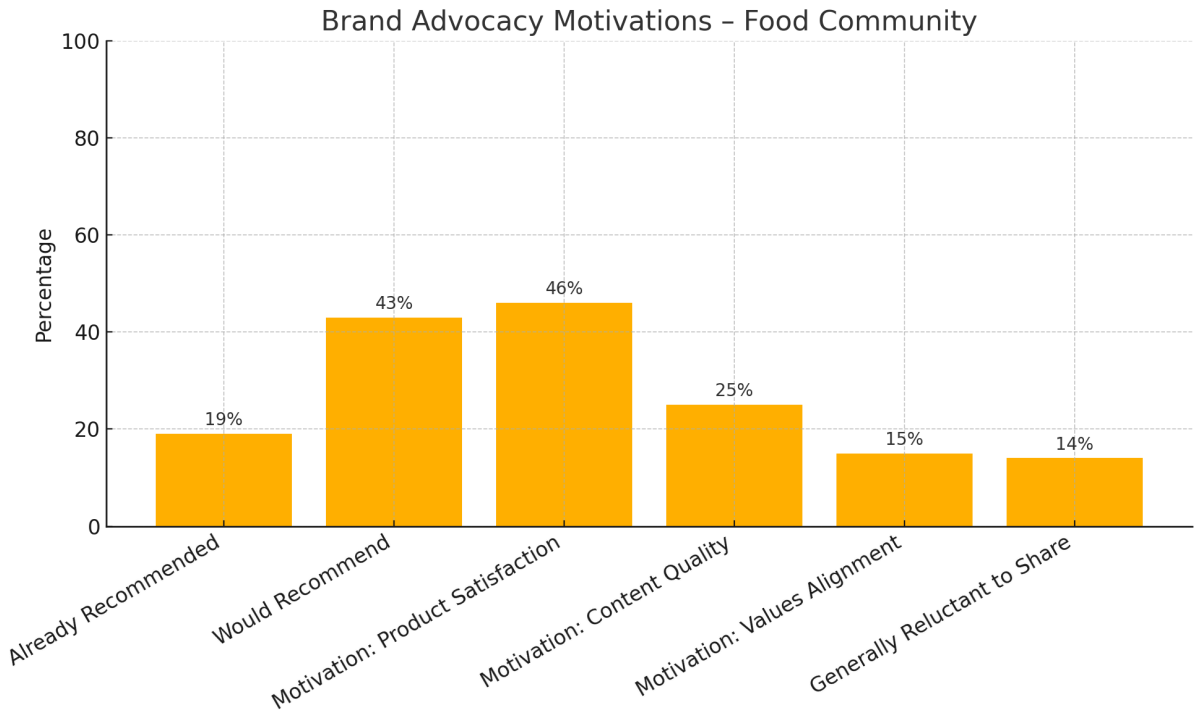
The food community reflected nearly identical trends. Only (12%) of participants were willing to follow a brand purely for its sustainability efforts, while (56%) would consider doing so only if the content was appealing. In cases of greenwashing or false claims, (22.6%) stated they would unfollow the brand, and (45.2%) said it would depend on the extent of the dishonesty. This suggests that while sustainability plays a role in loyalty and engagement, it is rarely the sole or primary driver. Instead, it is most effective when it complements personal relevance and quality content.



3.2.4 Advocacy and Community Participation Food (Sub-question 4)

To assess advocacy potential, participants were asked 2 questions found in Appendix H.

Comparable motivations were observed in the food community. Here, (19%) of respondents had already shared or recommended a sustainable brand, and (43%) indicated that they would be open to doing so in the future. Product satisfaction emerged again as the dominant motivator, with (46%) selecting it as the main reason they would speak positively about a brand. Content quality (25%) and alignment with values (15%) were also influential. Notably, in both communities, approximately one in seven respondents expressed a general reluctance to talk about brands at all, indicating a baseline of disengagement that even sustainability may not overcome.



4. Discussion

This section of the thesis, as the name suggests, interprets and discusses the results in light of the research question: “How can sustainable clothing start-ups use sustainability driven strategies on digital platforms to persuade Gen Z consumers and foster a loyal online community?” The analysis draws insights from the comparison between the football and food communities and connects these to existing literature on Gen Z behavior, branding, and sustainability. Rather than discussing each sub-question individually, this section zooms out to reflect on overarching trends, patterns, and strategic implications.

Both communities demonstrated high exposure to sustainability messaging, particularly when it was grounded in tangible, product based strategies. Gen Z respondents in both groups recognized materials like recycled fabrics or organic ingredients way easier compared to

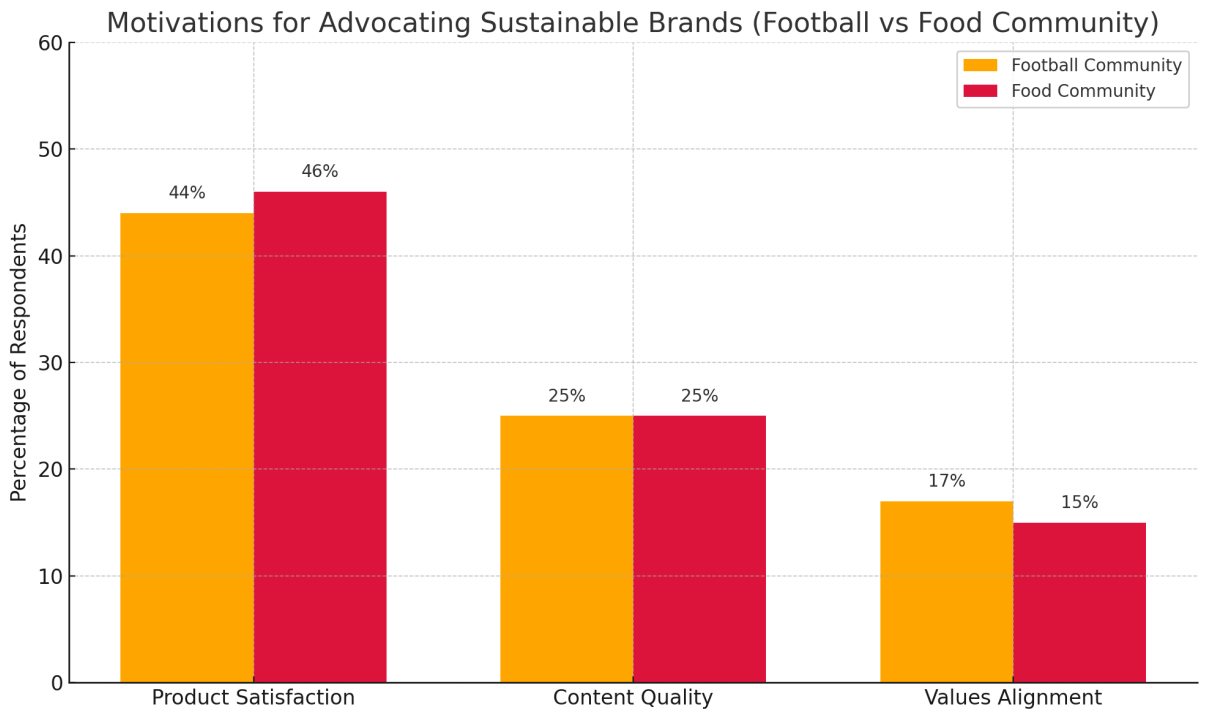
abstract sustainability actions. This is consistent with Palomo Domínguez et al. (2023), who found that Gen Z connects better with visible and material elements of sustainability. Strategies like carbon neutrality or supply chain transparency, while commendable, were much less recalled, suggesting they are either poorly communicated or harder to emotionally engage with which that is also a challenge noted by Hanson et al. (2018).

Crucially, despite coming from different sectors, the food and football communities showed remarkably similar patterns in how they process sustainability messages. This convergence suggests that what matters the most for Gen Z is not the product category, but the communicability of the sustainability strategy. As digital natives are navigating similar content ecosystems, their expectations of brands, especially when it regards their values, aesthetics, and authenticity appear broadly shared. This fact reinforces the idea that successful branding hinges on storytelling that feels transparent, visual, and values driven, regardless of the product being sold.

Skepticism toward sustainability claims was the dominant sentiment. While not apathetic, many respondents clearly showed cautious engagement because they are open to being persuaded but expect brands to earn that trust. This reflects the concerns raised by Kurpierz & Smith (2020) on the dangers of greenwashing and it also aligns with Pradhan et al. (2022), who emphasized that Gen Z demands for moral integrity in branding. In other words, they scrutinize the people behind the brand and not just the message. As a result, authenticity becomes a performance that must be repeated consistently through behind the scenes content, founder storytelling, and real life proof results.

One of the most revealing insights is the concept of conditional loyalty. As shown in the results, the majority of Gen Z participants indicated that they would only follow or engage with a sustainable brand if it also aligned with their stylistic or content preferences. This supports the broader idea behind the "Value Action Gap" as described by Williams et al. (2020), which highlights that while many consumers express strong sustainability values, they often face internal conflict when it comes to finally acting on them. Competing priorities such as price, design, or personal relevance have the ability to override sustainability in the decision making process. Thus, in this context, sustainability does not guarantee loyalty, but rather operates as a baseline expectation, a trust contract that remains invisible when intact, but causes reputational damage if broken.

Similarly, while brand advocacy was relatively low in practice, there is substantial latent potential. Many participants expressed willingness to recommend sustainable brands, provided that they are personally inspired by the values, content, or quality of the product.



Advocacy, then, is not just a marketing outcome but a byproduct of emotional alignment. As Golob et al. (2022) argues, Gen Z is more likely to engage when brand messaging aligns with their identity and peer relationships. Encouraging advocacy through emotionally charged prompts like (“Tag a friend who lives by these values”) taps into their desire for belonging and meaning making.

Something crucial to mention is that despite representing two distinctly different lifestyle sectors the football/streetwear and the food/wellness, the response patterns across both communities were surprisingly similar. This convergence suggests that Gen Z, regardless of specific interests, may share a broader generational logic when it comes to evaluating sustainability. Their reactions appear rooted less in the product category and more in the digital culture they navigate. As the first digital natives, Gen Z consumers are exposed to similar platform dynamics, content algorithms, and aesthetic standards, which may be shaping a shared set of expectations around brand behavior and authenticity. Because of that, their alignment likely reflects a much deeper cultural sensibility, one that prioritizes relatability, consistency, and values based communication over the nature of the product itself.

It is also important to interpret these findings with an awareness of potential limitations. The self selecting nature of the sample, platform specific dynamics (IG, Whatsapp, Mail), and possible attitudinal bias, especially within the health conscious food community could have potentially influenced the results. While the consistency of responses strengthens their

indicative value, the relatively small sample sizes and the distinct profiles of each community (e.g. the football group being predominantly male and style focused, while the food group being health oriented and possibly more sustainability aware) mean that these findings should be seen as suggestive rather than universally representative.

Transdisciplinary Reflection

This research brought together academic theory and real world practice through collaboration with Lqst.files and Zoe Food Co. Engaging with these communities revealed clear differences in how knowledge is viewed. Academia emphasizes structure, representativeness, and theory, while practitioners focus more on relevance, audience response, and actionable insights. For example, academic concerns around bias or conceptual framing were less pressing to brand teams, who prioritized how findings could guide content or branding decisions.

To bridge these gaps, I adapted academic language into practical poll questions and aligned research goals with community relevance. This experience helped me navigate and reconcile different expectations, showing how theory can guide practice and how real world insights can sharpen research. It highlighted the value of transdisciplinary collaboration in making research both credible and impactful.

Start-ups can tap into Gen Z's desire for community and meaning by creating emotionally resonant micro actions. Rather than using generic calls to action like "Share our mission," they can frame advocacy as an expression of belonging: "Share this if you feel part of our movement." These phrasing choices help turn passive support into active engagement. In this way, digital community building becomes much more than just a tool for brand growth, it becomes a social mechanism for identity formation and collective purpose, particularly when sustainability is framed as a shared value.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to answer the research question: *"How can sustainable clothing start-ups use sustainability driven strategies on digital platforms to persuade Gen Z consumers and foster a loyal online community?"* Through a quantitative exploration of two Gen Z communities, one sports fashion oriented and one food focused, the research offers new insights into how sustainability, digital branding, and community building intersect in the minds and behaviors of this generation.

The findings confirm that while Gen Z is frequently exposed to sustainability messages, their perception is marked by a high degree of skepticism. Both communities expressed strong

doubt about brand authenticity, revealing a demand not only for transparency but for emotionally genuine storytelling. Sustainability is valued, but it is rarely the sole reason for engagement or loyalty. Instead, it functions as a baseline expectation, a silent contract, where, if broken, can destroy trust between the consumer and the company

Importantly, the study highlights that sustainability only becomes persuasive when it is embedded within a brand's identity, aesthetics, and content strategy. Gen Z consumers are more likely to follow or support a brand when it resonates with their personal style and values. This highlights the need for true integration, because sustainability cannot stand alone, it must be expressed through relatable content, design, and tone.

While brand advocacy remains limited, the data reveals significant untapped potential. Many participants indicated a willingness to share or recommend sustainable brands, suggesting that the right emotional or aesthetic triggers could activate this latent advocacy. These triggers are strongly tied to feelings of belonging, self-expression, and meaningful community connection. For start-ups, this presents an opportunity to build community not just through messaging, but through experiences that make consumers feel involved, seen, and part of something larger than themselves.

5.1 Practical Recommendations for Start-Ups

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made for sustainable clothing start-ups seeking to engage Gen Z consumers through digital platforms. First and foremost, authenticity must take precedence over perfection. Gen Z is more likely to forgive imperfection than dishonesty. Therefore, brands should be transparent about their sustainability efforts while openly acknowledging their limitations. Rather than presenting a flawless image, start-ups should focus on documenting their sustainability journey, showing growth, progress, and effort. In simple terms "Be Real"

Moreover, sustainability should be integrated seamlessly into the brand's visual identity and content strategy. It should not be treated as a one off campaign or seasonal message, but rather as a core element of the brand's design, storytelling, values, and products. This kind of alignment between visual aesthetics and ethical positioning resonates strongly with Gen Z, who seek consistency and integrity in the brands they like and support.

Another key strategy I believe is to activate the sense of community through emotionally resonant messaging. Instead of relying solely on product promotion, start-ups should frame sustainability as part of a shared identity and purpose. Calls to action such as "Wear this to represent change" or "Share this if you truly believe in these values" can serve to foster

connection and belonging, which are two psychological drivers that are particularly influential to this generation.

Furthermore, the messaging around sustainability should be concrete and relatable. Rather than relying on abstract terminology like “carbon neutral” or “eco-conscious,” brands should highlight more common visible and tangible actions such as the use of recycled materials, ethical labor practices, or transparent sourcing. These concrete easier to understand examples allow consumers to understand and believe in the sustainability efforts being made.

In addition, start-ups should design participation pathways that allow consumers to become part of the brand’s development. Initiatives such as interactive polls, online contests, ambassador programs, or behind the scenes first person view content can foster a sense of co-creation. This interactive approach not only strengthens community bonds but also makes consumers feel seen, valued, and most importantly involved in the brand’s journey and evolution.

Finally, start-ups must remain responsive to feedback, especially in public forums. If community members raise concerns or offer constructive criticism, addressing these issues openly and respectfully can reinforce brand credibility and deepen trust. Gen Z places a high value on dialogue and expects brands to listen, learn, and respond honestly and visibly.

In conclusion, sustainable branding aimed at the Gen Z demographic requires more than eco labels or ethical slogans. It must be true and deeply rooted in authenticity, relationality, and digital fluency. Start-ups that embrace these principles have the potential to not only build loyal audiences but also position themselves as drivers of cultural and environmental progress, a process and a movement that grows more and more everyday.

6. Limitations and Reflection

While this study provides valuable insights into how sustainable clothing start-ups can engage Gen Z through sustainability driven digital strategies, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. These boundaries do not diminish the relevance of the findings but rather contextualize their scope and invite further inquiry.

First of all, the data was collected through structured polls distributed to two specific Gen Z communities. The first one is focused on football and clothing, and the other on food and health conscious branding. While the food community was primarily based in the UK and reflects a more localized European demographic, the football community drew from a much

broader, international base. Respondents included individuals from North America, Asia, Africa, and Europe, offering a more global perspective. However, it is important to note that participants from Western regions were somewhat overrepresented in terms of awareness and vocabulary around sustainability, likely due to greater access to education, digital infrastructure, and exposure to environmental discourse. As such, while the data reflects geographic diversity, the interpretation of sustainability concepts may still lean toward Western cultural framing.

Secondly, the use of multiple choice polls, though efficient for gathering quantifiable data, restricts the depth of responses. Participants could select from predefined options but could not elaborate on their reasoning, emotional drivers, or situational context. I reckon a mixed method approach combining polls with interviews or open-ended responses could potentially help uncover richer, more textured insights, especially around trust, skepticism, and community engagement.

Thirdly, this research adopts a positivist lens, aiming to uncover generalizable trends rather than deeply interpret subjective experiences. While appropriate for the goals of this study, it limits the exploration of individual narratives and does not fully capture how personal identity, culture, or lived experience may influence engagement with sustainability.

Personal Motivation - Purpose statement – Aims & Objectives

The main reason I chose to conduct this research is based on how it connects to my personal interests. It is very meaningful to me, both, on a personal and professional level because, in December 2022 I founded my own clothing brand called “Lqst.files” a start-up focused on selling football streetwear clothes currently operating on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook. This has allowed me to experience first-hand the benefits, the potential and the challenges that exist when trying to connect sustainability with branding and online community building. This combined with my academic experience in sustainable entrepreneurship, has helped me to better and further understand these issues, eventually fueling my desire even more to create a meaningful change and make an impact in this industry.

Thus, this is not just an academic exercise, it’s a reflection of my personal commitment to build a sustainable future for my clothing brand that will hopefully encourage and provide an example for other clothing start-ups to do the same. By addressing research gaps and contributing to this growing field, I hope to inspire a new wave of businesses that prioritize sustainability and community building at their core and ultimately create a blueprint with guidelines for clothing start-ups to use. I want to help them understand how to implement

sustainable branding strategies to effectively engage Gen Z consumers and eventually foster loyalty and long-term relationships. Strategies that focus on sustainability, affordability and connection with online communities are critical for the continuously evolving relationship among brands and customers.

Through identifying the research gaps and contributing to this increasing field, I hope to spark a new wave of businesses, where sustainability and focus on online communities are at the core.

Reflecting on the research process, this study has been deeply meaningful not only as an academic exercise but as a natural extension of my entrepreneurial journey. As the founder of football clothing, a start-up I have built with for over 2.5 years now, this research offered me far more than theoretical insight. It challenged me to truly understand what sustainability means to my audience and how it must be communicated not just as a surface level trend, but as something truly real and authentic, relevant, and consistently present across the brand identity.

Through this process, I have learned that engaging Gen Z is not just about offering sustainable products but about building trust, culture, and emotional resonance. I now truly understand the depth storytelling has, the power of authenticity, and the strategic necessity of aligning aesthetics with values.I've realized that branding is not just a visual thing for aesthetics but it's emotional and immersive. It's about creating a world people want to take part in and belong to.

All in all, this thesis has taught me how important it is to not only present sustainability clearly, but to embed it into the soul of the brand, so it's not just said, but really felt by everyone. I walk away from this project not just more informed, but more dedicated and inspired. It reaffirmed my belief that *I must not just create* a clothing brand but a platform for community, creativity, and meaningful change. Every insight gained here will serve as a compass for how I move forward, not just as a student of sustainability, but as a practitioner shaping the future I believe in.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

"How often do you see clothing brands advertising about using recycled or organic materials?
Options: a) very often/ b) often / c) sometimes / d) rarely / e) never

They were also asked:
"Which of the following sustainability strategies have you seen brands using recently?"
Options: a) Use of recycled or organic materials / b) Transparency in supply chains / c)Take-back or repair programs / d) Carbon-neutral or eco-friendly messaging

APPENDIX B

"Do you believe most brands are genuine when they talk about sustainability?"
Options: a) Yes / b) Sometimes / c) No / d) I don't pay attention

They were also asked:
"Does a brand's focus on sustainability affect how you feel about them?"
Options: a) Yes I respect it more/ b) Only if I already like the brand / c) Not Really /d) I don't care about that

They were also asked:
"How often do you feel sustainability is just a marketing trick?"
Options:a) Very often / b) Sometimes / c) Rarely / d) Never

APPENDIX C

"Would you follow a clothing brand just because it is sustainable?"
Options: a) Yes / b) Only if style fits / c) no / d) not sure

They were also asked:
"If a brand lies about sustainability, would you unfollow them?"
Options: a) Yes / b) Maybe / c) No / d) Depends on how fake

APPENDIX D

"Have you ever shared or recommended a sustainable brand ?"
Options: a) Yes / b) No / c) I would if I liked the brand / d) I don't recommend brands at all

They were also asked:
"What would motivate you to share a brand with your friends or community?"

Options: a) Story,Values Alignment / b) Creative content / c) Love their products / d) I don't share brands

APPENDIX E

"How often do you see food brands advertising about using organic ingredients or sustainable packaging?
Options: a) very often/ b) often / c) sometimes / d) rarely / e) never

They were also asked:
"Which of the following sustainability strategies have you seen food brands using recently?"
Options: a) Use of organic ingredients or sustainable farming methods / b) Transparency about sourcing and supply chains / c) Reusable, compostable or minimal packaging / d) Carbon-neutral or eco-friendly messaging

APPENDIX F:

"Do you believe most food brands are genuine when they talk about sustainability?"
Options: a) Yes / b) Sometimes / c) No / d) I don't pay attention.

They were also asked:
"Does a food brand's sustainability message affect how you feel about them?"
Options: a) Yes It makes me like, respect them more / b) Only if it feels authentic / c)Not Really / d) I don't care about that

They were also asked:
"How often do you feel sustainability is just a marketing trick?"
Options: a) Very often / b) Sometimes / c) Rarely / d) Never

APPENDIX G

"Would you follow a food related brand just because it promotes sustainability?"
Options: a) Yes / b) Only if the content appeals to me / c) no / d) not sure

They were also asked:
"If a brand lies about sustainability, would you unfollow them?"
Options: a) Yes / b) Maybe / c) No / d) Depends on how fake

APPENDIX H

"Have you ever shared or recommended a sustainable food brand to someone?"
Options: a) Yes / b) No / c) I would if I liked it / d) I don't recommend brands at all

They were also asked:
"What would motivate you to share a sustainable food brand with your friends or community?"
Options: a) Their Values / b) Creative content / c) Their Products / d) I don't share brands

Reference List

Amadeo Moreno, C. (2022-2023). Engaging customers through digital marketing: The story of Nude Project. Bachelor's degree in International Business, Department of Business. Tutor: Prof. Francisco Javier Jolonch Palau.

Amoah, J., Jibril, A. B., Egala, S. B., & Keelson, S. A. (2022). Online brand community and consumer brand trust: Analysis from Czech millennials. Cogent Business & Management, 9(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2022.2149152

Anand V. (2024). The price dilemma in sustainable products: A barrier to adoption. INFORMS Journal, Analytics driving better business decisions https://pubsonline.informs.org/do/10.1287/LYTX.2024.04.03/full/

Andrews, B. (2025, January 19). Ireland now must confront its role in fast fashion's unethical practices, says MEP as Shein workers on 1c... The Irish Sun. https://www.thesun.ie/news/14558315/eu-crackdown-calls-unethical-fast-fashion-shein-temu/?utm_source

BIG little LDN & UNIDO. (2024). What Gen Z really think: sustainable fashion. BIG Little LDN.

Bloomberg. (2018, August 20). Gen Z to outnumber millennials within a year. Bloomberg. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-20/gen-z-to-outnumber-millennials-within-a-year-demographic-trends

Brandão, A., & Magalhães, F. (2023b). Please tell me how sustainable you are, and I'll tell you how much I value you! The impact of young consumers' motivations on luxury fashion. Cogent Business & Management, 10(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2287786

Bringe, A. (2024, October 1). The Power Of Community: How Fashion Brands Are Building Loyalty Among Gen Z. Retrieved January 16, 2025, from https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbescommunicationscouncil/2024/10/01/the-power-of-community-how-fashion-brands-are-building-loyalty-among-gen-z/

Build, H. F. (2024, January 15). The Sustainable Fashion Revolution: How Gen Z is Redefining Style - CarbonShack. https://www.carbonshack.com/resources/library/blog-detail/100/the-sustainable-fashion-revolution-how-gen-z-is-redefining-style/

Campbell, J. A., University of Washington, Aragon, C., University of Washington, Davis, K., University of Washington, Evans, S., University of Washington, Evans, A., University of Washington, Randall, D. P., & University of Washington. (n.d.). Thousands of Positive Reviews: Distributed Mentoring in Online Fan Communities. Thousands of Positive Reviews: Distributed Mentoring in Online Fan Communities.

Chang, C., & Chang, S. (2023). The Impact of digital disruption: Influences of digital media and social networks on forming digital natives' attitude. SAGE Open, 13(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231191741

Chaudhri, V., Pridmore, J. and Mauck, C. (2022) 'Assembling the Start-up Brand: A process framework for understanding strategic communication challenges,' International Journal of Strategic Communication, 16(2), pp. 206–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2021.1976784.

Cheng, F. -F. et al. (2018) Creating customer loyalty in online brand communities, Computers in Human Behavior. journal-article. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.10.018.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications. https://www.ucg.ac.me/skladiste/blog_609332/objava_105202/fajlovi/Creswell.pdf

Eckert, C., Crommentuijn-Marsh, P., & Black, S. (2022). The role of networks in supporting micro- and small-sized sustainable fashion businesses. Sustainability Science Practice and Policy, 18(1), 544–559. https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2097772

El-Shihy, D., & Awaad, S. (2025). Leveraging social media for sustainable fashion: how brand and user-generated content influence Gen Z's purchase intentions. Future Business Journal, 11(113). https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-025-00529-3

Fashion and the circular economy. (2022). https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/fashion/overview?utm_source

Ferrari, R. (2015). Writing narrative style literature reviews. Medical Writing, 24(4), 230-235.https://doi.org/10.1179/2047480615Z.000000000329

Golob, U. et al. (2022) 'Brand management and sustainability: exploring potential for the transformative power of brands,' Journal of Brand Management, 29(6), pp. 513–519. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-022-00293-7.

Hanson, S., Jiang, L. and Dahl, D. (2018) 'Enhancing consumer engagement in an online brand community via user reputation signals: a multi-method analysis,' Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 47(2), pp. 349–367. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-018-0617-2.

Hassay, D. N., & Peloza, J. (2009). Building the charity brand community [Research article]. Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, 24–55.

Hoang, H. T., Quang, N. V., & Cham, D. N. (2024). The Relationship Between Gamification Marketing and Gen Z Sustainable Decision: Role of Customer Experience. HaUI Journal of Science and Technology, 60(11E), 97–105.

Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. Nature Reviews Earth & Environment, 1(4), 189-200. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9

Palomo-Domínguez, I., Elías-Zambrano, R. and Álvarez-Rodríguez, V. (2023) 'Gen Z's Motivations towards Sustainable Fashion and Eco-Friendly Brand Attributes: The Case of Vinted,' Sustainability, 15(11), p. 8753. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15118753.

Pradhan, D., Kuanr, A., Pahi, S. A., & Akram, M. S. (2022). Influencer marketing: When and why gen Z consumers avoid influencers and endorsed brands. Psychology and Marketing, 40(1), 27–47. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21749

Prasanna, M., & Priyanka, A. L. (2024). Marketing to Gen Z: Understanding the preferences and behaviors of next generation. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 6(4). https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i04.26612

Qualtrics. (n.d.). Survey bias: What it is, why it matters, and how to reduce it. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/survey-bias/

Salam, K. N., Singkeruang, A. W. T. F., Husni, M. F., Baharuddin, B., & AR, D. P. (2024). Gen-Z Marketing Strategies: Understanding consumer preferences and building sustainable relationships. Golden Ratio of Mapping Idea and Literature Format, 4(1), 53–77. https://doi.org/10.52970/grmilf.v4i1.351

Sato, M. (2024, August 27). Shein says it found two cases of child labor in its supply chain last year. The Verge. https://www.theverge.com/2024/8/27/24229755/shein-child-labor-fast-fasahion-transparency-report?utm_source

Schwarz, A. H. & Department of Business Administration. (2024). Green Marketing: The influence of sustainable digital marketing content on Gen Z. A case study on Germany. In Master Thesis [Thesis].

Silverman, D. (2017). Doing qualitative research (5E ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/2017_silverman_doing__qualitative_research_book.pdf

Study.com. (n.d.). Interpretivism in sociology: Concept & origin. Retrieve January 17, 2025, from https://study.com/learn/lesson/interpretivism-sociology-concept-origin.html#:~:text=The%20interpretivist%20approach%20to%20research,individual%20perspectives%20and%20cultural%20values

Technology and Operations Management. (2015, December 10). Patagonia: A focus on a sustainable model. https://d3.harvard.edu/platform-rctom/submission/patagonia-a-focus-on-a-sustainable-model/

The Editor(s) In C. E. Henninger & N. K. Athwal (Eds.), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG. (2022). Sustainable Luxury: an international perspective. Palgrave Advances in Luxury. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06928-4

The European Green Deal: A growth strategy that protects the climate. (n.d.). https://ec.europa.eu/stories/european-green-deal/

The price is not right: Gen Z's sustainable-fashion conundrum. (2023, June 20). https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/email/genz/2023/06/2023-06-06b.html

Türkmen, H. G., & Akman, Y. (2023). Virtue-signaling versus corporate social responsibility in marketing: A literature review and analysis on social media. 4th International ACHARAKA Congress on Humanities and Social Sciences, 166–174. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372597515

UNiDAYS. (n.d.). Gen Z's sustainable shopping demands and how to meet them. https://www.genzinsights.com/gen-z-sustainable-shopping-demands

Williams, A., Hodges, N., & University of North Carolina at Greensboro. (2020). Generation Z and Socially Responsible fashion Consumption: Exploring the Value-Action Gap. In ITAA Proceedings (No. 77). https://itaaonline.org

Winit, W., Kantabutra, S., & Sooksan Kantabutra. (2023). Toward a Sustainability Brand Model: An Integrative Review. In Hong-Youl Ha (Ed.), Sustainability (Vol. 15, p. 5212) [Journal-article]. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15065212

Zwieglinska, Z., & Zwieglinska, Z. (2022, September 8). How fashion is getting Gen Z excited about sustainability. Glossy. https://www.glossy.co/fashion/how-fashion-is-getting-gen-z-excited-about-sustainability/