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## **Fabric of change: insights from Gen Z college students on government's role in promoting sustainability in fashion**

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**Abstract:** This study examines Gen Z college students' consumer attitudes toward government interventions aimed at promoting sustainability in the fashion industry. Many from this demographic have been sceptical about government involvement. To cultivate ethical leaders in sustainability, it is crucial to consider students' perspectives. Employing a mixed-methods design, this examination triangulates data from participants' social media discourse. Sentiment analysis was conducted to assess the tone of comments, followed by cluster analysis to categorise comments into three clusters based on identifying patterns. Furthermore, frequency analysis was employed to examine the prevalence of attitudes, and common themes were identified through thematic analysis. The findings reveal robust support among Gen Z consumers for stringent government regulations to address market failures, aligning with public interest theory. However, nuanced perspectives favouring incentives and industry-led efforts resonate with public choice theory's emphasis on self-interest. Despite prior research indicating a lack of confidence in governments among Gen Z, this study underscores the cohort's desire for a holistic approach balancing regulatory measures with financial incentives, collaborative initiatives, consumer education, transparency, and trust-building efforts to drive sustainable transformations while accommodating this demographic's diverse priorities.

**Keywords:** consumer behaviour; college students; Gen Z; sustainable fashion; government regulations; public interest theory; public choice theory; consumer attitudes; fashion industry; sustainability initiatives.

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Desislava Budeva is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the Ramapo College of New Jersey. She holds a PhD in Marketing from the Florida Atlantic University. Her research interests include consumer behaviours and attitudes, the impact of culture on consumer behaviour, international market selection and segmentation, and pedagogical issues in educating future managers.

## 1 Introduction

The global fashion industry has undergone profound transformations in recent years. Characterised by rapid production cycles, excessive resource consumption, and a notorious reputation for environmental and social externalities, the industry stands at a crossroads, facing mounting pressure to reconcile its growth ambitions with the pressing global challenges of sustainability (Mukendi et al., 2020). Recognising the urgent need for reform, governments and regulatory bodies across the world are increasingly turning their attention to the fashion sector, instituting a myriad of regulations and incentives aimed at promoting sustainable practices.

Researchers have investigated government regulations as a method to support and compel companies to implement sustainable practices in the fashion industry. For example, Niu et al. (2017) examined the role that government regulations have on retailers' decisions to switch to a sustainable procurement strategy. Despite these efforts, very little is known about overall consumer attitudes toward government interventions. This work expands upon this literature, by investigating Gen Z consumer attitudes toward

government regulations and incentives in the context of the fashion industry's sustainability initiatives. Specifically, in this study, we seek to answer the following investigative question:

- Do Gen Z consumers favour government intervention to require companies to move toward a more sustainable future?

Comprising those born from 1997 to 2012, Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, constitutes the second-largest population segment, trailing closely behind millennials (Statista, 2022). Understanding Gen Z consumer attitudes toward government regulations and incentives is of paramount significance for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the fashion industry is a major contributor to global environmental degradation. From resource-intensive production processes to textile waste, the sector generates a substantial carbon footprint and a multitude of other sustainability issues. Government regulations can play a pivotal role in steering the industry towards more sustainable practices, such as reducing emissions, conserving water and promoting circularity. However, for these regulations to be effective, they must align with consumer values and desires. By scrutinising consumer attitudes, we gain insight into the degree to which regulations resonate with public concerns and the potential barriers to compliance.

Secondly, as sustainability becomes an increasingly prevalent concern, consumers are becoming more conscious of the environmental and social impacts of their choices. They are not just passive recipients of fashion products; they have the power to influence supply chains through their purchasing decisions. Regulations and incentives can affect the availability and attractiveness of sustainable fashion options. Thus, exploring consumer attitudes toward these policy measures allows us to discern whether such interventions drive demand for sustainable products, and subsequently, change industry practices.

Furthermore, the fashion industry, with its global reach and diverse consumer base, provides a unique context for studying consumer attitudes toward regulations. Cultural, economic, and social factors all play a role in shaping these attitudes, creating a complex landscape of preferences that necessitates comprehensive investigation. By doing so, we can derive insights that are not only applicable to the fashion industry but may also have broader implications for other sectors undergoing sustainability transitions.

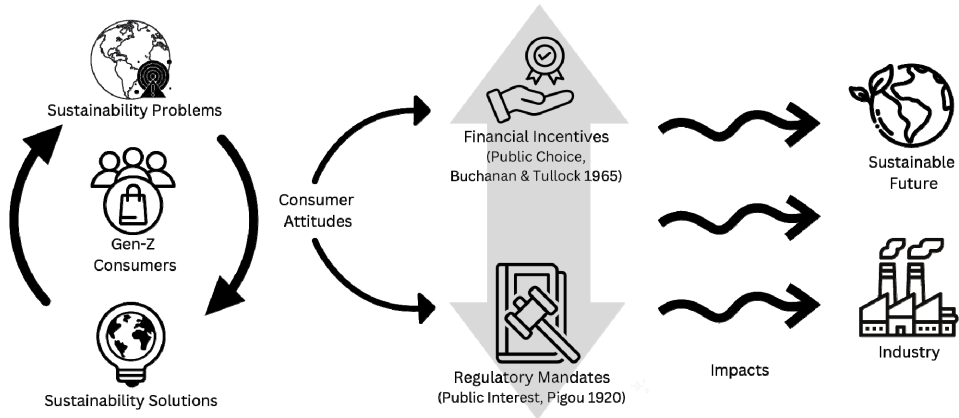
Recent research has indicated that Gen Z exhibits a lack of confidence in the federal government and elected officials, with a substantial portion of this demographic perceiving that elected representatives prioritise the needs of the affluent and corporate entities over the interests of the general populace (PRRI, 2024). Consequently, to cultivate a cohort of accountable leaders for the future who will meaningfully contribute to sustainability initiatives rather than give in to cynicism, it is important to consider the thoughts and opinions of this influential demographic group.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model that explains the continuum of perspectives of the Gen Z demographic cohort vis-à-vis regulatory interventions by governmental entities aimed at promoting sustainable practices within the fashion industry, as well as the bearing such dispositions have on industry and the planet writ large.

As companies grapple with the environmental and social problems caused by the fashion industry and implement solutions to address these issues, Gen Z consumers are taking note. This generation is known to care more about sustainability and ethical issues compared to previous generations (Tyson et al., 2021), and their attitudes and purchasing

decisions are driving change in the industry (Gomes et al., 2023). Despite nascent initiatives, substantial gaps persist within the current literature regarding Gen Z consumers' perspectives on the potential utility of government regulations and incentives as mechanisms to engender an ethical, ecological consciousness within the fashion industry. By examining their attitudes towards government intervention in promoting sustainability, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to both academia and policymaking and understand the potential for such policies to drive the transition towards a more sustainable future.

**Figure 1** Influence of Gen Z attitudes toward government interventions – model



## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Regulatory efforts aimed at improving sustainability in the fashion industry

In response to the growing concern about the industry's contribution to climate change and other environmental issues, scholars have examined the impact of incentives and regulations aimed at improving the sustainability of the fashion industry. For example, Kisumua (2021) analysed the role of regulation in the growth of the fashion industry in Nigeria, and pointed to the regulatory framework as a disincentive for fashion firms, as regulations have increased costs, bureaucracy, and taxes, hampered knowledge sharing, and noted that SMEs find it difficult to comply with regulations and often operate informally outside the legal frameworks. Other studies found generally positive outcomes of government interventions in the fashion industry. Peleg Mizrachi and Tal (2022a) examined strategies for promoting sustainable, fair, and circular fashion and concluded that public policy and government intervention are critical to promoting sustainability. In another study offering an examination of the fashion industry's complex production chain, they delineate the underlying catalysts that have precipitated the industry's dismal track record and bolster the nascent regulatory frameworks and initiatives that seek to rectify these long-standing issues (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal, 2022b). Researchers have examined channel alternatives for a remanufacturing fashion supply chain when there are government subsidies and found that the government plays an important role in promoting remanufacturing and sustainability through financial incentives (Wang et al.,

2014). Other investigators have examined the obstacles and drivers to adopting sustainable manufacturing practices in the fashion industry in Cape Town, South Africa, and see a responsibility for the government to promote education, provide access to funding, and implement policies to enable the transition to more sustainable practices (Monyaki and Cilliers, 2023). Ioannou and Serafeim (2017) examined the impact of mandatory corporate sustainability reporting regulations on companies' disclosure practices and financial performance in China, Denmark, Malaysia and South Africa. The authors found that regulations mandating sustainability reporting significantly increased ESG disclosure, thus improving transparency and driving positive changes in disclosure practices. Vijayarasa and Liu (2022) examined how the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be used to promote greater gender justice in the fashion industry and believe coordinated government efforts are vital to catalyse an ethical, sustainable and gender-just industry.

Results from other studies found more nuanced outcomes. Dobos (2023) examined how to compel fashion multinational corporations to be more sustainable by proposing two perspectives: top-down through regulation, and bottom-up through changing consumer habits and NGO activism. The author argues neither is enough on its own and that MNCs themselves would be the most effective source of change, coupled with government regulation and consumer pressure. Dobos and Éltető (2023) argue that fashion industry regulation has failed to deliver sustainability, analyse the tensions between profits and sustainability, and offer managerial and policy suggestions to improve sustainability and lessen exaggerated sustainability claims, which erodes consumer trust. Manshoven and Van Opstal (2022), who examined support for different policy instruments to enable a transition to a circular fashion system, found broad support for government intervention, especially mandatory regulations, although differences between stakeholder preferences remain. Their findings suggest that a holistic policy approach that includes government regulations and public and private incentives could accelerate the sustainability transition and change consumer behaviour and culture. Suraci (2021) and Peleg Mizrahi and Tal (2022a, 2022b) argue that regulation is needed to address the negative issues surrounding the fashion industry and propose several specific policy approaches. These include supply chain accountability, product life-cycle responsibility, prohibition of unsustainable materials/processes, voluntary sustainability incentives, waste fees, legal liability for worker rights violations, advertising standards, educational campaigns, carbon taxes, economic incentives for sustainable businesses, and standardisation/certification of sustainable fashion. Both articles conclude that while some policies score highly across all criteria, there are often trade-offs between effectiveness, equity, sustainability and feasibility. They recommend an integrated policy approach combining multiple strategies to address the complex challenges of the fashion industry.

## *2.2 Consumer attitudes toward government interventions*

Given the scrutiny of the fashion industry and the role of government regulations in promoting sustainability, there is a growing scholarly interest in exploring consumer attitudes toward such interventions. For example, Hur and Faragher-Siddall (2022) explore young consumers' perspectives on government policy interventions for sustainable fashion consumption in the UK and note how they are increasingly vocal

about sustainability issues in fashion, but their views on policy interventions are overlooked. Consumers who support increased government spending on environmental initiatives are more likely to prioritise environmental protection over economic growth (Chen and Chai, 2010). Others emphasise the need for consumer education to increase knowledge, address concerns and build trust (Huang and Guo, 2021; Lin, 2022). The literature exhibits a discernible emphasis on the theme of consumer education, as evidenced by the presence of multiple papers espousing this notion. In their chapter that undertakes a comprehensive review of research works on sustainable fast fashion and real-world industry practices across diverse domains, Liu and Xie (2022) suggest that consumer education should be a focal point for more concerted efforts. However, Verplanken and Wood (2006) argue that consumer habits are automatic behaviours caused by stable environmental contexts, making them resistant to change through information or education alone. Successful habit change, the authors argue, requires disrupting the environmental cues that trigger old habits, establishing incentives for new behaviours, and promoting repetition of new actions in stable contexts to form new habits. Other investigators have analysed the factors that influence sustainable apparel merchandising (Wu et al., 2022). The authors argue that lack of government intervention and support has led to weak consumer awareness and a lack of standardisation and call for government standards and strategies for sustainable merchandising that brands must follow. Ekström and Salomonson (2014) found that consumers are often confused about recycling their old clothes and believe that the government should be more proactive in educating consumers and simplifying the recycling process. The government should allocate more resources to provide the necessary means and make it easier for individuals to engage in green behaviour (Leonidou et al., 2010).

Gonzalez-Arcos et al. (2021) examine consumer resistance to sustainability interventions and argue that resistance emerges not primarily because consumers are unwilling to change, but because the targeted individual behaviours are embedded in broader social practices. Authors argue that effective sustainability interventions should focus on changing social practices rather than individual behaviours, and should consider all practice carriers (not just consumers) in distributing responsibilities. We should take into account the impacts of political polarisation on consumer psychology, marketing, public policy and consumer welfare (Davvetas et al., 2022). Political ideology affects consumer reactions to government regulations (Irmak et al., 2020; Leiserowitz, 2006; Leonidou et al., 2010). Conservatives are more likely than liberals to react negatively and engage in the discouraged behaviour when regulations or warnings come from government sources (Irmak et al., 2020). The researchers attribute this to psychological reactance – conservatives perceive government regulations as a greater threat to their freedom and thus are motivated to reassert that freedom by acting counter to the regulation. Another factor that seems to affect attitudes toward government intervention is culture as resistance differs across different countries. For example, Orel and Zeren (2011) found that Turkish respondents generally had more positive attitudes towards government regulations and intervention in the marketplace compared to Polish respondents, who had less favourable views.

Research on individual consumer behaviour finds that consumers are multifaceted and act in a more nuanced manner. For example, consumers with an internal locus of control prefer less restriction and oversight, while those with an external locus of control are more likely to want more government intervention (Hoffman et al., 2003). Hsu and Chen (2014) found that matching messaging to consumers' regulatory focus resulted in

more positive attitudes and purchase intentions, demonstrating a ‘regulatory fit’ effect. Liu (2022) examined the attitude-behaviour gap in purchasing sustainable fashion among Gen Z consumers in China and believes that the government can help to close this gap through consumer-facing policies, industry regulations and incentives. Efforts to promote sustainability require enabling institutions and social norms, not just individual attitudes (Martinez et al., 2015). The results indicate complex relationships between consumer attitudes, behaviours and support for regulations. Positive environmental attitudes alone may not translate to sustainable behaviours.

### 2.3 Competing theories on government interventions

In our study, we delve into the examination of Gen Z consumer behaviour perspectives through the lens of two contrasting conceptual frameworks: public interest theory and public choice theory. These theories offer distinct vantage points from which to scrutinise the role of industry regulations and their implications for consumer behaviour. Table 1 indicates the key differences between these two theories.

**Table 1** Public interest theory vs. public choice theory

|                 | <i>Public interest theory</i>                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>Public choice theory</i>                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Perspective     | Policymakers identify instances of potential market failure and seek ways to correct them.                                                                                                                       | Considers what motivates or incentivises policymakers when they make policy choices.                                                                                                          |
| Decision-making | Policies should reflect the needs of the majority while preserving minority rights. Determining what is in the ‘public interest’ may involve value judgements and differing perspectives on societal priorities. | Parties pursue their interests by engaging in exchanges, negotiations and transactions. Actors seek to maximise their gains, whether it is through policies, regulations, or public spending. |
| Motivation      | Assumes that government officials act in the public’s best interest and prioritise the welfare of society.                                                                                                       | Assumes individuals, including politicians and voters, act in their self-interest to maximise personal gain or utility.                                                                       |
| Focus           | Achieving the common good and addressing externalities.                                                                                                                                                          | Understanding the behaviour of politicians, bureaucrats, and voters in the political arena.                                                                                                   |
| Critique        | May oversimplify the complexities of decision-making and overlook self-interest.                                                                                                                                 | May overlook the potential for collective action and the pursuit of societal well-being.                                                                                                      |

*Source:* University of Washington (2016a, 2016b)

Public interest theory, which traces its origins to the seminal work of Pigou (1920), proposes that government intervention in economic affairs is warranted when it serves the collective best interests of the public. This theory upholds the notion that regulatory measures should be implemented with the overarching aim of maximising social welfare and safeguarding the rights and well-being of citizens. In contrast, public choice theory emerged in the 1960s as a challenge to the public interest theory of regulation. Advocated by scholars such as Buchanan and Tullock (1965), this theory rests on the fundamental premise that all individuals, including those in positions of public service, are inherently

driven by self-interest. This perspective posits that regulatory decisions are often influenced by the pursuit of personal gain or the advancement of narrow interest groups, rather than being solely motivated by the pursuit of the greater public good.

By juxtaposing these two theoretical frameworks, our study seeks to shed light on the interplay between industry regulations, consumer behaviour, and the underlying motivations that shape regulatory decisions. Through this analysis, we aim to provide insight into the complex dynamics that govern Gen Z consumer behaviour and provide insights into how regulatory frameworks can be optimised to strike a balance between promoting public welfare and accommodating the diverse interests of stakeholders.

### **3 Data and method**

The present study employs a mixed-method research design, incorporating participants' social media comments to perform various analytical techniques such as sentiment analysis, cluster analysis, frequency analysis and thematic analysis. To address the research question posited by this study, it is essential to examine Gen Z's perspectives on the government's role in promoting sustainability. This study follows an interpretive philosophical paradigm that aims to understand social and cultural phenomena through the meaning that people attach to them (Hovorka and Lee, 2010).

#### *3.1 Data collection*

Data for this study was gathered from undergraduate student posts to a private Facebook group created by the researchers. Students who participated in this study were primarily undergraduate business school students at a public liberal arts college in the northeastern USA. The group acted as a supplementary platform for communication and engagement related to courses taught by two researchers during eight semesters over a two-year period. Once per week, for eight weeks each semester, researchers shared content, asked questions, and initiated discussions related to topics relevant to sustainable fashion. Posts encouraged students to engage with the content, and in doing so, take a point of view and argue their perspective. As such, the group acted as a community of practice where students and researchers "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As all group members were able to see and respond to content, researchers generated a rich set of perspectives. To date, over 175 students have actively participated in this group. As the main objective of this research is to gain insight into the opinions and attitudes of participants and how they are formed, a theoretical sampling approach is deemed appropriate. This method involves selecting cases that are particularly well-suited for shedding light on and expanding upon the relationships and logic among various concepts, rather than relying on random selection for statistical generalisation (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

#### *3.2 Data analysis*

Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse data. To ensure a comprehensive and robust analysis, we utilised a mixed methods approach that served as a mechanism for triangulating evidence (Creswell and Clark, 2017; Venkatesh

et al., 2013). Comments made by the students on selected posts related to government interventions were extracted for analysis, including both the initial comments made in response to the researchers' posts and subsequent comments made by students in response to each other. To understand the tone of comments toward government interventions, we used quantitative sentiment analysis and categorised comments as positive, negative, or neutral. This provided a comprehensive understanding of participants' opinions. Additionally, we conducted a cluster analysis to identify patterns and relationships within the data and to understand the structure and composition of participant opinions. By grouping similar comments together, we gained a more nuanced perspective on the underlying trends and factors. In investigating the frequency of attitudes or themes in combinations of one, two, and three words, we found that two-word combinations were most appropriate for further analysis. We utilised a text-mining process to tokenise comments and count the frequency of each combination. After reviewing the results and comments, we performed a thematic analysis to identify common themes or topics that emerged. Alongside this, the research team also analysed the comments qualitatively to understand the participants' attitudes toward government interventions. Exploring the comments qualitatively helps in understanding the attitudes and decisions of the participants in the discussion context (Myers, 2019). It is also a suitable technique for addressing 'how' and 'why' questions (Dubé and Paré, 2003) when dealing with an unfamiliar area.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Sentiment analysis

The predominant sentiment among Gen Z respondents is highly supportive of imposing stringent, enforceable government regulations to mandate sustainability practices, labour standards, emissions reductions, and transparency from fashion brands. Table 2 presents the categorising of comments by sentiment.

**Table 2** Sentiment classification of comments

| <i>Positive</i> | <i>Neutral or mixed</i> | <i>Negative</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 135             | 12                      | 7               | 154          |

Out of 154 total comments, 135 were coded as 'positive' sentiment. Only seven comments were coded as 'negative' sentiment toward regulations. Twelve comments were coded as 'neutral' or 'mixed'. While suggestions for government interventions range from incentives such as tax breaks to penalties such as fines for non-compliance, many agree that voluntary guidelines are not enough, and strict requirements and regulations are needed to force real change in an industry plagued by environmental harm and labour exploitation.

Respondents indicate that it is unreasonable to expect that consumers' demand for companies to move toward socially responsible/sustainable practices would suffice. For example, students were asked to respond to a post concerning a novel legislative proposal in the New York State Assembly that would mandate comprehensive disclosure of sustainability metrics and supply chain practices among major apparel and footwear corporations (Lehrer, 2022). The statutory provisions of the Fashion Sustainability and

Social Accountability Act ('Fashion Act'), impose a binding obligation upon apparel companies. These corporations are mandated to disclose the environmental and societal impacts of their production methods and undertake concerted efforts to curtail greenhouse gas emissions. The law also necessitates the mapping of at least 50% of their supplier network, coupled with a comprehensive reporting of the wages disbursed to production workers by these suppliers, juxtaposed against the prevailing local minimum wage (NYSAG, 2023).

The following excerpt is typical among respondents' sentiments who believe that such penalties could be very effective:

"Fashion companies not complying with this bill will risk receiving penalties of up to two percent of their annual revenue. Therefore, these companies would be more inclined to disclose significant information addressing how they would impact climate change to avoid these penalties."

Several other study participants drew parallels between the prospective sustainability regulations in the fashion sector and existing disclosure mandates across various other industries, such as food production, automotive manufacturing and beyond. These comparisons highlighted instances where companies are compelled to transparently report information regarding product composition, environmental emissions and labour practices. Respondents raised the question of why similar standards of transparency and accountability should not be applied to the fashion industry. For example:

"I believe that if there was a description similar to a nutrition label on clothing products, it would create awareness and elevate motives in caring for the environment. This ideology can be compared to asking somebody what they would do if there was no nutrition label on their grocery products. They wouldn't magically know the ingredients, sugars, and fats in their products and everyday foods."

The study participants extended these arguments, asserting that regulatory interventions must transcend localised jurisdictions and be implemented on a global scale. They emphasised the imperative for internationally harmonised sustainability mandates within the fashion industry, positing that such coordinated efforts are essential to foster consumer confidence and enable informed, ethically guided purchasing decisions through comprehensive transparency measures. The following is a representative observation from one of the study participants, which encapsulates the sentiment that globally coordinated regulatory frameworks are indispensable for cultivating consumer trust and facilitating informed, socially responsible purchasing behaviours within the fashion industry.

"No matter what we change, we need to get China on board if we really want to change the world."

A few respondents voiced opposition to government regulation, with several noting that directives may disproportionately hurt small businesses that cannot afford changes. One respondent believes that regulations should only focus on the largest companies, such as those with over \$100 million in revenue.

In response to another article where the author muses that while British manufacturing is not a guarantee of better wages or transparency, Britain has labour laws and environmental standards that should ensure products are made in a way that is fair (Benson, 2023), another participant articulated a prevalent sentiment. In their comment, the respondent suggested that mandated sustainability reporting may have limited

efficacy in altering consumer purchasing decisions, because this approach presupposes that the law will be adequately enforced, and even in the event of rigorous enforcement, companies may be incentivised to exploit loopholes and circumvent regulations, ultimately undermining the intended purpose of such laws:

“I do not believe that implementing stricter laws would be the best solution that would get companies to do the right thing. There are two reasons for that. First, that way assumes that the law will be properly enforced. As mentioned in the article, despite the UK’s minimum wage laws, there were still incidents of workers being underpaid. Next is that even if the law is enforced, companies will be motivated to find loopholes and workarounds. This will result in fewer companies doing the right thing. I believe that an industry self-regulatory approach would be more effective. Even without strict laws on the books confining them, companies will still be compelled to stay in line and do the right thing. This would be because it would be the best business decision in the long term.”

Our study also yielded several noteworthy findings, including the perception that regulatory interventions could catalyse technological advancements in sustainable textiles and manufacturing processes, potentially precipitating a cascade of proactive, industry-wide reforms that extend beyond the scope of legal mandates. Several respondents pointed out that regulations enforcing sustainable practices could be positive for companies because sustainability would become integral to brand image and competitiveness.

Respondents also perceive domestic production as inherently more environmentally friendly and socially beneficial compared to outsourced, global supply chains. Several respondents advocated for a resurgence of localised manufacturing within the fashion industry, arguing that such a shift would yield multifaceted advantages, including reduced carbon emissions, enhanced regulatory compliance and oversight, expanded employment opportunities and streamlined logistics. The repatriation of apparel production is thus viewed as a pivotal strategy in the pursuit of a more sustainable and ethically responsible fashion ecosystem.

“Producing domestically thus builds a relationship between the designer and the producer where the final result of the garment could come out exactly as how the designer had envisioned.”

“A necessary step to making the industry more sustainable will be building out a domestic textile industry. The United States can encourage companies to move textile manufacturing back to the U.S. through tax breaks and incentives.”

The study participants frequently drew parallels and insights from regulatory frameworks in adjacent industries to inform their perspectives on potential fashion sustainability mandates. One illustrative example is a respondent’s commentary on legislative efforts to curtail animal testing practices in the cosmetics and beauty products sector:

“For example, the testing of makeup products on animals has not led to the downfall of popular companies that practice this.”

In this instance, the respondent surmises that while mandatory transparency measures may dissuade a subset of environmentally aware consumers, such disclosures are unlikely to significantly influence the purchasing behaviours of mainstream fast fashion

customers, drawing a comparison to the limited impact of animal testing declarations in the cosmetics industry. Furthermore, a prevalent sentiment among study participants is a pervasive mistrust in corporate self-reporting, with many asserting that robust third-party oversight is essential to ensure the credibility of fashion brands' sustainability claims, akin to the regulatory role played by agencies like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in validating food production assertions.

One respondent drew an analogy between prospective regulations mandating transparency in the fashion industry and the cautionary health disclaimers prominently displayed on cigarette packaging.

“The warnings listed on cigarette boxes that detail how it’s bad for your health. In this case, consumers will see how bad it may have been for the environment that a certain piece of clothing was produced and can urge them to perhaps hang onto it for longer and make more use.”

Intriguingly, the respondent suggests that consumer awareness of deleterious production processes may not serve as an effective deterrent to purchase decisions. Rather, such knowledge might paradoxically encourage individuals to prolong the lifespan of their garments, opting to retain them for extended periods instead of engaging in premature disposal.

The sentiment analysis provides a foundational understanding of the general attitudes held by Gen Z participants towards government interventions in the fashion industry. Building on these insights, the subsequent cluster analysis delves deeper into the specific patterns and relationships within these attitudes, offering a more granular exploration of the diverse perspectives and underlying factors that shape participants' views.

#### *4.2 Cluster analysis*

The cluster analysis revealed three distinct segments within the dataset, which are listed in Table 3. The first cluster exhibited a pronounced convergence of perspectives that accentuated and advocated for the pivotal role of governmental regulations and policy interventions as the principal drivers of sustainable development. Respondents within this cohort underscored the inadequacy of voluntary consumer and business practices, asserting that stringent regulations and punitive measures are the means to establish accountability. Furthermore, this group manifested a discernible undercurrent of distrust toward corporate entities. This cluster is labelled the ‘regulatory mandate’ segment and can be characterised as command and control.

The second cluster presented a distinct orientation towards innovation-centric, collaborative industrial transformation, predicated on enforceable mandates rather than mere guidelines. Discourse within this cohort frequently encompassed topics such as production optimisations, novel processes and materials, and consumer education initiatives. Participants in this cluster posited that while baseline enforceable requirements remain indispensable, the paramount emphasis should be on industry leadership catalysing change through creativity and discovery. This cluster is labelled the ‘innovative transformation’ segment and can be described as a carrot and stick.

**Table 3** Gen Z government intervention consortia

| <i>Regulatory mandate<br/>'command-and-control'</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <i>Innovative transformation<br/>'carrot and stick'</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <i>Incentivised localisation<br/>'economics and incentives'</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strict government regulations and penalties will lead to accountability. Voluntary consumer and business practices are insufficient. Focus on the role of government regulation and policy interventions to drive sustainability. Respondents demonstrate distrust of corporations. | Industry leads to enacting change through creativity and discovery, supplemented with baseline enforceable requirements. Focus on innovation-centred, collaborative industry efforts such as production improvements, new processes/materials, and consumer education, led by enforceable requirements rather than guidelines alone. | Costs and economic considerations are central. Enact financial incentives or offer profit motives for businesses to adopt sustainable practices, enabled by supportive infrastructure and policies. Focus on making the business case to companies to adopt sustainability by highlighting cost advantages. |

The third cluster evinced a marked emphasis accorded to cost considerations and economic factors. Respondents within this cohort advocated for financial incentives or profit-oriented motives as the impetus for businesses to adopt sustainable practices, facilitated by a supportive infrastructural and policy framework. There were calls for the implementation of financial incentives and the establishment of a compelling business case for corporations, underscoring the cost advantages associated with the adoption of sustainability measures. Numerous responses highlighted the advantages of domestic and localised manufacturing processes concerning sustainability, such as reduced transportation emissions, the ability to ensure closer oversight over fair labour laws, the support of local artisanal and craft communities, and shorter supply chains back to raw material producers. Thus, the cluster is labelled the 'incentivised localisation' segment and can be expressed as economics and incentives.

The cluster analysis revealed distinct segments within the participant attitudes, highlighting key areas of consensus and divergence. To further refine our understanding of these patterns, the subsequent frequency and thematic analyses examine the most recurrent themes and concepts within the data, offering deeper insights into the specific issues and ideas that resonate most strongly with Gen Z consumers.

#### 4.3 Frequency analysis and thematic analysis

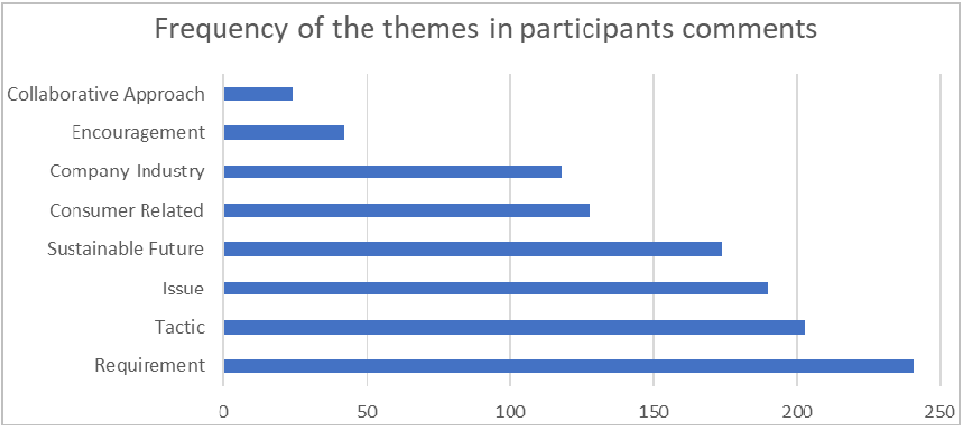
Following a comprehensive analysis of the data, the research team concluded that two-word combinations would be the most promising avenue for further investigations. It was determined that one-word combinations exhibited an excessive degree of dispersion, while three-word combinations lacked the requisite frequency of repetition, thereby rendering them less conducive to the research objectives. The analysis employed a mixed-methods approach. The initial phase involved the tokenisation of comments through text-mining techniques, followed by the enumeration of the frequency of each combination. A thematic analysis was then undertaken, wherein the research team reviewed the results and synthesised the primary keywords to identify emergent topics. These topics were subjected to further analysis, culminating in the identification of eight distinct themes emanating from the participants' comments, as presented in Table 4.

**Table 4** Resultant themes

| <i>Theme</i>           | <i>Variety of respondent remarks</i>                                                       |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Issue                  | Observations that identify a problem related to sustainability.                            |
| Tactic                 | Comments that proposed solutions to sustainability problems.                               |
| Consumer related       | Consumer-related expressions of feelings or conclusions.                                   |
| Encouragement          | Remarks that offer support or incentives for moving towards a sustainable future.          |
| Requirements           | Opinions that advocate for constraints or mandates imposed upon companies or the industry. |
| Collaborative approach | Observations that suggest cooperation or collective effort.                                |
| Sustainable future     | Statements that articulate a desire for a sustainable future.                              |
| Company-industry       | Indications that companies or the industry may be negatively or positively impacted.       |

The results of the frequency analysis conducted on the eight identified themes are presented in Figure 2. The most prevalent theme emanated from comments expressing the exigency for the imposition of constraints or mandates upon corporate entities (i.e., requirements). Conversely, comments advocating the provision of support or incentives (i.e., encouragement) or suggesting cooperation or a collective effort (i.e., collaborative approach) were ranked seventh and eighth, respectively, in terms of frequency, indicating that they were the least favoured among the participants.

**Figure 2** Frequency of key concepts (themes) (see online version for colours)

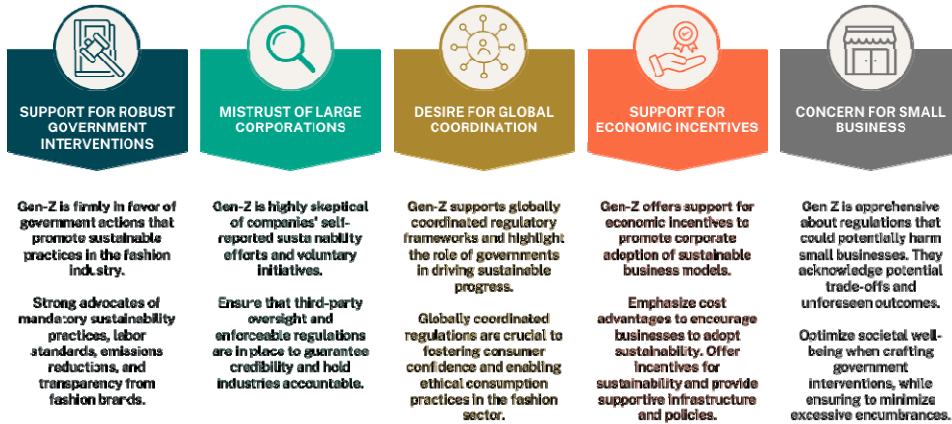


## 5 Discussion and implications

This investigation provides valuable insights into the diversity of perspectives within the Gen Z cohort regarding government interventions in the fashion industry. The following discussion highlights the nuanced interplay between public interest theory and public choice theory in shaping Gen Z consumer attitudes toward sustainability transitions.

Figure 3 summarises the findings from our research study illustrating the robust support held by the Gen Z cohort regarding globally coordinated regulatory policies to remediate market failures, while acknowledging the industry-driven initiatives incentivised through policy mechanisms.

**Figure 3** Implications derived from study findings (see online version for colours)



### 5.1 Support for robust governmental interventions

Our findings underscore the Gen Z cohort's unequivocal support for robust governmental interventions to engender sustainable practices within the fashion industry. These findings align with Hur and Faragher-Siddall (2022) who reveal a significantly positive perception among consumers regarding governmental intervention in sustainable fashion consumption, particularly in the context of regulatory measures aimed at curbing unethical practices and greenwashing activities perpetrated by fashion brands.

Our sentiment analysis revealed a predominant positive sentiment expressed by Gen Z respondents toward stringent, enforceable government regulations aligning with the public interest theory theoretical framework (see Table 2). The overwhelming majority of respondents advocate for mandatory sustainability practices, labour standards, emissions reductions, and transparency from fashion brands, suggesting that they perceive such interventions as beneficial to the broader public interest. This sentiment resonates with the notion that the fashion industry's environmental and social externalities represent market failures that necessitate government intervention to correct and safeguard public welfare.

We again see this perspective for a strong government role in helping to promote societal welfare reflected in the 'regulatory mandate' segment resulting from our cluster analysis (see Table 3). Respondents in this segment advocate for stringent government regulations and punitive measures as the primary drivers of sustainable development in the fashion industry. Aligning with the public interest theory's stance that market failures require government intervention to protect the public good, this segment's focus highlights the insufficiency of voluntary practices by consumers and businesses.

The prevalence of these themes also emerged as part of our frequency analysis and thematic analysis. Figure 2, which presents the frequency of key concepts, reveals a striking emphasis on the theme of ‘requirements’, advocating for constraints or mandates imposed upon companies or the industry. This finding again aligns with the principles of public interest theory. Gen Z consumers, as evidenced by this analysis, perceive stringent regulations and enforceable mandates as a necessary means to compel the fashion industry to address its environmental and social externalities, thereby serving the collective interests of society.

### *5.2 Mistrust of large corporations, but concern for small businesses*

The sentiment analysis also reveals a pervasive mistrust among Gen Z consumers towards corporate self-reporting and voluntary sustainability initiatives. Both in the sentiment analysis and the ‘regulatory mandate’ cluster (Table 3), respondents expressed scepticism about the efficacy of self-regulatory approaches, echoing the public interest theory’s stance that market actors may prioritise self-interest over public welfare in the absence of external oversight. This sentiment underscores the perceived need for robust third-party oversight and binding regulations to ensure sustainability claims’ credibility and enforce industry accountability.

This finding aligns with broader contemporary evidence demonstrating a generational tendency towards institutional distrust. A recent comprehensive survey conducted by Gallup (2024) provides corroborating evidence of Gen Z’s widespread lack of confidence in major US institutions, including corporate entities. The study examined attitudes towards 11 distinct institutions and found that, with the notable exception of science, no institution garners majority trust from Gen Z respondents. Of particular relevance to our findings, the survey highlights Gen Z’s markedly low levels of trust in large companies, with only about one-sixth of respondents reporting ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of trust in these entities. This broader context of institutional scepticism provides a valuable framework for interpreting our findings regarding Gen Z’s attitudes towards sustainability initiatives, suggesting that their mistrust may be part of a larger pattern of generational scepticism towards institutional claims and practices.

Interestingly, a few respondents voiced concerns about the potential disproportionate impact of regulations on small businesses, reflecting a recognition of the trade-offs and unintended consequences that regulatory interventions may entail. This aligns with the nuanced perspective offered by public interest theory, which acknowledges that government intervention should be carefully calibrated to maximise overall social welfare while minimising undue burdens on specific segments of society.

### *5.3 Desire for global coordination*

The sentiment analysis revealed study participants’ advocacy for globally coordinated regulatory frameworks and an emphasis on the role of government in driving sustainability transitions. Similarly, respondents within the ‘incentivised localisation’ cluster (Table 3) call for supportive infrastructure and policies that facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices by corporations. These findings can be interpreted as a manifestation of the influence of industry stakeholders on regulatory decisions, which aligns with the public choice theory’s emphasis on economic incentives and the pursuit of self-interest. Public choice theory suggests that interest groups will pursue their own

objectives that may not align with the public interest. However, the sentiment analysis reveals a profound concern among Gen Z consumers for the well-being of society and the planet, rather than a narrowly defined self-interest, which challenges these core assumptions of public choice theory.

Local regulatory efforts can serve as critical building blocks for global sustainability coordination by providing empirically tested models and generating momentum for broader action. Local governments often possess greater flexibility to experiment with innovative policies, which can then be scaled up to regional, national or international levels. For example, Freiburg, Germany's pioneering sustainable urban planning concepts from the 1970s have influenced urban development policies across Europe and beyond (Coates, 2013). When multiple localities adopt similar sustainability regulations, it can create pressure for harmonisation at higher governmental levels, potentially leading to the development of national or international standards. California's vehicle emissions standards have shaped federal regulations in the USA and impacted global automotive practices (Martinez et al., 2022). Networks such as C40 Cities and ICLEI facilitate the dissemination of best practices and successful regulatory approaches, influencing higher-level policy frameworks. Additionally, local sustainability initiatives can foster public awareness and support, creating grassroots pressure for national and international action, as evidenced by the global climate strike movement (Associated Press, 2023).

#### *5.4 Backing for economic incentives*

Our findings revealed an 'incentivised localisation' cluster (Table 3), which exhibits a stronger affinity with the principles of public choice theory. This segment's advocacy for financial incentives and profit-oriented motives as impetuses for businesses to adopt sustainable practices aligns with the public choice theory's emphasis on economic incentives and the pursuit of self-interest.

Interestingly, the 'innovative transformation' cluster (Table 3) presents a synthesis of both the public interest and public choice theoretical frameworks. While acknowledging the necessity of baseline enforceable requirements, respondents in this segment emphasise the pivotal role of industry-led innovation and collaborative efforts in catalysing sustainable transformations. This perspective resonates with the public interest theory's recognition of the need for government intervention to correct market failures, while also embracing the public choice theory's notion of self-interested market actors driving change through creativity and discovery.

Financial incentives can be powerful motivators for companies to adopt sustainable practices by lowering costs, increasing profitability, and providing upfront capital, thereby making sustainable choices more economically attractive. For example, the Business Energy Investment Tax Credit in the USA, which offers up to a 30% tax credit for solar, fuel cells, and wind energy systems, significantly reduces upfront costs, encouraging investment in renewable energy (DOE, 2024). Similarly, cap-and-trade systems and carbon taxes incentivise emission reductions by making sustainable practices more cost-effective than carbon-intensive alternatives (EDF, 2020). Government-backed green loan programs, such as the US Small Business Administration's Green Lender Initiative and the US Department of Agriculture's Rural Energy for America Program (REAP, n.d.), offer lower interest rates and financial support for sustainability projects.

These programs reduce the cost of capital for businesses, particularly small enterprises, undertaking environmentally sustainable initiatives (SBA, 2024).

### 5.5 *Implications*

Based on these findings that shed light on Gen Z's perspectives and attitudes regarding government interventions in the fashion industry, several significant implications emerge that deserve careful consideration as we explore ways to drive sustainable change that aligns with the values and priorities of this influential generation:

- 1 Policymakers and industry stakeholders must acknowledge that Gen Z consumers are increasingly prioritising public welfare over individual or corporate self-interests. This generation's preference for robust regulatory frameworks stems from a deep concern for addressing the systemic issues of environmental degradation and social inequities perpetuated by the fashion industry. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z is more likely to support policies that confront market failures head-on, even if it means stricter regulations and potential short-term economic trade-offs. Their emphasis on societal well-being challenges policymakers to design regulations that go beyond surface-level adjustments and tackle the root causes of unsustainable practices. By aligning policies with Gen Z's values, policymakers can foster greater trust and engagement from this demographic, ensuring that the fashion industry evolves in a way that is both socially responsible and economically sustainable.
- 2 While Gen Z is often viewed as a unified group in terms of its support for sustainability, it is essential to recognise the diversity of perspectives within this cohort. Different subgroups within Gen Z may prioritise various aspects of sustainability, such as environmental justice, labour rights, or climate action, depending on factors like socio-economic background, education and cultural influences. A one-size-fits-all approach to regulation risks overlooking these nuances, potentially alienating segments of Gen Z that feel their specific concerns are not adequately addressed. Therefore, regulatory interventions should be flexible and inclusive, incorporating a range of strategies that resonate with the broad spectrum of Gen Z values. This could involve tailored policies that address specific issues, such as targeted subsidies for sustainable practices in underrepresented communities or initiatives that amplify the voices of young leaders advocating for diverse sustainability goals. By embracing a more nuanced approach, policymakers can ensure broader acceptance and effectiveness of sustainability initiatives across the entire Gen Z demographic.
- 3 A holistic approach that integrates both public interest theory and public choice theory is essential for crafting effective sustainability policies. Public interest theory emphasises the role of government in correcting market failures and protecting the common good, while public choice theory focuses on the self-interested behaviours of individuals and organisations. To effectively address Gen Z's sustainability concerns, policymakers should balance these perspectives by combining stringent regulatory interventions with financial incentives that appeal to the self-interest of businesses. For instance, regulations mandating transparency in supply chains could be paired with tax incentives for companies that exceed sustainability benchmarks. Additionally, fostering collaborative industry-led initiatives that involve stakeholders

across the value chain can drive innovation and ensure that sustainability becomes embedded in business practices. By blending these approaches, policymakers can create a regulatory environment that not only compels compliance but also encourages proactive participation from businesses, aligning economic motivations with the broader societal goals championed by Gen Z.

- 4 Consumer education and awareness are critical components of a successful sustainability strategy. Gen Z consumers are well-informed and value transparency, yet there is often a gap between their awareness of sustainability issues and their ability to engage with the solutions being proposed. To bridge this gap, policymakers and industry leaders should prioritise comprehensive education campaigns that not only inform but also empower Gen Z to make informed decisions. These campaigns could include educational initiatives in schools and universities, digital content that demystifies sustainability jargon, and interactive platforms that allow Gen Z consumers to track the impact of their choices. By aligning these educational efforts with tactical solutions – such as easy access to sustainable products or clear labelling on environmental impact – Gen Z consumers can more easily connect their everyday actions with the broader vision of a sustainable future. Engaged and informed, Gen Z is more likely to support and advocate for holistic sustainability strategies, driving both market demand and policy support for meaningful environmental and social change.
- 5 Transparency and trust are foundational to the success of any regulatory intervention aimed at sustainability. Gen Z consumers, who are particularly sceptical of corporate self-reporting and greenwashing, demand that both industry and government actions are not only effective but also credible. To foster trust, transparency must be built into every stage of the regulatory process, from the formulation of policies to their implementation and enforcement. This could involve mandatory disclosures of sustainability metrics, third-party audits, and public reporting mechanisms that allow consumers to verify claims made by companies. Additionally, fostering partnerships between governments, NGOs, and consumer advocacy groups can enhance oversight and accountability. By aligning industry practices with public welfare objectives and ensuring that these efforts are communicated clearly and honestly, policymakers can build a stronger relationship of trust with Gen Z consumers. This trust is essential for gaining their support and ensuring the long-term success of sustainability initiatives in the fashion industry.
- 6 Gen Z consumers wield significant influence as early adopters and trendsetters, making them key drivers of sustainable practices within the fashion industry. Recognising this, policymakers and industry leaders should align regulatory frameworks and sustainability initiatives with the values and priorities of this demographic to ensure a successful transition toward sustainability. This could involve engaging Gen Z in the policy-making process through consultations, focus groups, and advisory councils that reflect their perspectives on sustainability. Additionally, leveraging social media and digital platforms where Gen Z is most active can amplify messages about sustainable practices and encourage broader participation. By positioning Gen Z as partners in the sustainability journey, rather than merely consumers, the fashion industry can harness their enthusiasm and commitment to drive meaningful change. This alignment not only enhances the

credibility and effectiveness of sustainability initiatives but also ensures that the fashion industry remains relevant and resilient in a future increasingly defined by ethical and environmental considerations.

## 6 Conclusions

This empirical investigation sought to answer the following investigative question:

- Do Gen Z consumers favour government intervention to require companies to move toward a more sustainable future?

Our study yields diverse and nuanced implications. The findings reveal the intricate combination of public interest theory and public choice theory paradigms informing Gen Z consumer attitudes, underscoring their advocacy for robust regulatory frameworks to remediate market failures while in tandem, acknowledging the catalytic role of incentivised, industry-led initiatives. These results emphasise the need for a holistic, judicious approach that harmonises tailored regulatory edicts, collaborative stakeholder engagement, consumer awareness campaigns, and stringent transparency mechanisms.

While the present study reveals the complex interaction of theoretic precepts shaping Gen Z perspectives, further research is warranted to clarify the dynamics and socio-contextual factors moderating this outlook. Longitudinal investigations tracking the evolution of Gen Z attitudes as they transition through life stages could yield insights into the temporal stability of their preferences. Moreover, examinations across socio-economic strata may uncover the extent to which the findings generalise across subgroups.

The present study offers valuable insights into Gen Z college students' attitudes toward government interventions in promoting sustainability within the fashion industry. However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study's sample is limited to Gen Z college students from a public liberal arts college in the northeastern USA. This geographical and educational homogeneity may restrict the generalisability of the results to the broader Gen Z population, which encompasses diverse regions, educational backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. Additionally, the reliance on data collected from a private Facebook group introduces the potential for social media bias, as the nature of online discourse differs from in-person interactions, which could influence the authenticity and depth of the responses.

Moreover, while the study focuses on exploring attitudes, it does not extend to measuring actual consumer behaviours. The well-documented gap between stated beliefs and real-world actions, particularly in the context of sustainability (e.g., Carrington et al., 2014; Peattie, 2010), suggests that attitudes alone may not fully capture the complexities of consumer decision-making.

The study was conducted over eight semesters, a relatively short period given the rapidly evolving nature of social attitudes among Gen Z. As such, the study does not capture long-term trends and may not fully reflect shifts in opinion. Furthermore, while the focus on government interventions is essential, it somewhat overlooks the role of private sector initiatives and consumer-led movements, which are also critical components in driving sustainable practices. These limitations, though not diminishing the study's contributions, should be borne in mind when considering the broader implications of the findings.

By deftly navigating this varied landscape and aligning sustainability strategies with the multifaceted priorities of this influential demographic cohort, policymakers and industry actors may forge a promising course toward engendering transformative, constructive sustainability transitions within the fashion industry. A nuanced, discerning approach holds promise for cultivating the trust, accountability, and shared commitment required to address the sector's most exigent environmental and societal externalities.

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