

Fashion Consumerism: The Impact of Marketing Strategies on Generation Z Consumers

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry is one that constantly changes due to worldly events. One of the most common ways to market fashion to consumers is through social media. Interestingly, Generation Z is one of the leading causes of social media use for marketing. With COVID-19 drastically impacting all aspects of life, the researcher chose to answer this question: “How have fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands adapted their social media marketing to target Generation Z in The United States as a result of the pandemic?” The method chosen for this paper was a content analysis looking at 1,200 Instagram posts uploaded to the accounts of five fast fashion brands, and five sustainable fashion brands within chosen dates between 2019 and 2021. The study found that the biggest shifts in social media marketing lay within advocacy of worldly events, sustainability, and a decrease in regular clothing advertisements. While fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands are certainly different, there are interesting parallels between them as it pertains to social media marketing.

Introduction

The fashion industry is a powerful force that drives almost all societies around the world, sculpting the individuality and beauty of different cultures and people. Generation Z, or Gen Z, are the people born between 1995 and 2010 (Francis 2). Unlike other generations, Gen Z is obsessed with the online world and does not know life without digitalization and social media. A 2017 journal article published in the Global Journal of Enterprise Information defines social media as “any electronic service through which Internet users [are] able to create and share a variety of contents over the Internet” (Prakash 111). The social media sector in the United States increased by \$104 billion in sales between 2017 and 2020 and is still on the rise (Thomas 13). A study published in a 2020 journal article about the e-lifestyle of Gen Z found that over two-thirds of Gen Z high school students use social media daily, and 70% carry mobile devices (Wijaya 27). As a result of this massive online presence, the consumer behavior of Generation Z has changed over the past decade, with brands continuously altering their image through social media to appeal to the desires of the younger generation. It is evident that an influx of digitalization has sparked an online world dominated by Gen Z.

Since its first appearance in the late 1990s, fast fashion has redefined the structure and functioning of the fashion industry entirely. Fast fashion is a business model that includes the production and consumption of stylish apparel at a low price and has significant implications on the environment as a result of an ongoing cycle of production, consumption, and waste (Niinimäki 189; Gupta 2; Moorhouse 17). An accredited academic article, titled *Waste Couture*, reveals that a shocking 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions can be traced back to the apparel industry as a result of an emerging obsession with fast fashion, particularly amongst Gen Z consumers (Claudio 450). In comparison, sustainable fashion has a lack of consumer interest but has an apparent sustainability-oriented business model. While a universal definition has yet to be solidified, sustainable fashion revolves around clothing industries reducing excessive textile usage and limiting environmental degradation (Kustenkova 2).

Fashion marketing has been on the global agenda since the dawn of industrialization but has never changed as drastically as it did during the rise of COVID-19. By April of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic took over the entire world and disrupted every aspect of fashion retailing. There was sadness looming amongst consumers, as society began to realize the environmental implications of the fashion industry. An article published in the Journal of Health Management describes how “COVID-19 has pulled the handbrake for the humankind race to destruction and redirected attention to life and living” (Mehta 10). There is a lack of research on how Gen Z consumer tendencies have altered marketing strategies as a result of the global pandemic. With the facts and figures presented, the following question has been raised: How have fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands adapted their social media marketing to target Generation Z in The United States as a result of the pandemic?

Literature Review

Consumerism & Fast Fashion

Brands such as Zara, Forever 21, H&M, and Shein are companies that people turn to for the most trendy, cheap, and desirable clothing on the market today. It is important to understand how consumers are targeted through marketing strategies within such brands. The newest, and most successful form of fast fashion marketing is through social media. Brands have turned to social media for two reasons: it is cost-effective and more efficient in allowing for consumer engagement. According to an article published by the Aalto University School of Business, pictures and videos have become the most effective way to market to consumers since they have an innate desire to purchase the trendiest designs that can be seen through visuals. In an attempt to understand which social media platform performed best when marketing for fast fashion, a questionnaire was sent out to 105 consumers. It found that Instagram, at 86%, was not only the most popular site for producers of fast fashion apparel but also for the consumers (Koivulehto 35). In addition, when looking at fast fashion consumer tendencies, it is clear that impulsive spending has become a driving force for fast fashion brands. Dr. Elvira Bolat, a professor in Digital Marketing, looked into how social media influencers impact impulsivity. In her study, she clarifies that influencers are people who have the potential to impact consumer behavior through persuasion and social networks. A survey was sent out to 465 people to see how influencers impact their consumerism. The results showed that 57% agreed to some extent that impulsive spending had to do with seeing influencers using a product. Of that 57%, the respondents believed that the most impactful influencers were the ones who cared about social issues and the environment (5). While some studies argue that there is a shift to sustainable thinking in fast fashion, influencers shine a light on the ethical dilemma that is impulsive consumerism as a result of social media marketing.

Some of the more obvious consumer engagement strategies for fast fashion brands include fast response to changing preferences, short life cycles for products, and low prices. Businesses have to look at their marketing strategies and constantly react to new trends and styles. When a comparison is made between expensive luxury brands with limited items and affordable fast fashion brands with a plethora of items, consumers are naturally drawn to fast fashion. A study by Canie K. Chu Lo in 2020 introduced the idea that consumers are driven by the concept of ‘Desired by Many, Owned by Very Few’ when it comes down to the best way to market fashion brands (330). Chu Lo claims that people are attracted to a limited supply of items rather than easily-accessible items. However, when it comes down to what consumers truly desire, Lubica Knošková advances the notion of a consumer preference of availability in her 2019 survey with 150 participants. 63.5% of respondents explain that they prefer fast fashion brands because of the availability and affordability of the items (61). In summation, accessibility, impulsivity, and cheap products all lead to a consumer desire for fast fashion.

Consumerism & Sustainable Fashion

Consumers of sustainable fashion have very different mindsets when purchasing fashion items. In comparison to an emphasis on people and profit, sustainable brands focus on the planet. In her honors thesis, Zhanna Kutsenkova at the Dominican University of California conducted a meta-analysis by exploring a variety of studies that investigated the purchasing behaviors of consumers of sustainable fashion. She gave credence to a consumer shift to an ethical mindset when it comes to fashion consumption. Firstly, she found that consumers are significantly warier when human rights violations occur (11). Lilian Dach, who published her findings on the same issue in 2014, attested to this concept by explaining how sweatshop labor is a major ethical concern amongst consumers (410). Kutsenkova references a study held in 2012 that interviewed 39 frequent consumers of ethical apparel companies to understand what the major moral and physical purchasing criteria were. While the sample size was limited, the primary result revealed that sustainable clothing needed to meet a threshold that would let the clothing last for lengthy periods in both trendiness and durability while still having limited impacts on the environment. In addition, a majority of the participants revealed how clothes produced under environmentally friendly conditions led to a feeling of satisfaction in helping the environment (Kutsenkova 11). This expresses the importance of sustainable fashion having psychological and physical benefits for a consumer's self-esteem.

Published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Hyejune Park discusses another survey conducted in 2015 with a specific goal of determining the mindset of sustainable fashion consumers when purchasing clothing. While many of the participants believed that ethics mattered greatly when purchasing sustainable clothing, the majority expressed their belief that 'fitting in' was the end-all-be-all in fashion consumption (115). This survey; however, is limited because it is very open-ended. Melea Press at the Hanken School of Economics counters the notion of consumers being driven by 'fitting in' by asking consumers to answer hypothetical sustainability-related issues in fashion. One of the first questions asked consumers to discuss their feelings when boycotting companies that exploited their workers. The results found that consumers enjoy the idea of helping to reduce the challenges and risks associated with fashion for the benefit of the rest of society (1355). By taking a chance and standing up for their beliefs, the consumers felt better about their contributions. A 2021 article cited the need for "operating with sustainability" since "appearing socially responsible could be a decisive element [in] whether the individuals want to associate with [a] brand or not as it draws in a consumer's 'feel-good' nature in consumption (Žukauskas 52).

The last, and arguably the most important aspect of consumer tendencies for sustainable fashion, is brand transparency. Dong Shen published his works in the *Marketing Management Journal* in 2013 asking a variety of questions about environmentally friendly clothing products distributed to 500 college students. While the original intent was to uncover whether or not consumers were drawn to terms such as 'green', 'organic', and 'eco', they found that the strongest motivators for purchasing sustainable clothing were when brands were open about eco-fashion involvement and environmental commitment (137). Press cited the need for disclosure and accountability in marketing tactics for sustainable brands. This has to do with a consumer's belief system that purchasing from a credible brand means that the consumer-producer relationship has environmental benefits (Press 1355). With this being said, building a more sustainability-oriented consumer basis means supplying clear information about environmentally conscious products through marketing strategies.

Generation Z Consumer Behavior

Gen Z is a prominent group with a significant amount of power to engage with brands and influence branding techniques. Fashion brands are faced with the challenge of understanding the behaviors and values of this generation. According to Tracy Francis, a retail professional, there are three main aspects to Gen Z and their interpretation and implications on the consumer-producer relationship. These include: having access to rather than possession of clothing, having consumption as a form of individual identity, and having the ability to make

ethical decisions with regard to purchasing habits (2). Accumulating research published in 2020 found similar consumer tendencies. Author Jorge Vieira sent out a questionnaire to 233 Gen Z members of society, aged 10 to 25 years old, and found that Gen Z places high stakes on the freedom to choose. In addition, one of the ways Gen Z communicates their consumer interest is through social media interactions, through which they discuss opinions about different products and brands. This generation encapsulates their opinions by using a variety of social media outlets including Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. One result found that 49% of Gen Z consumers believe that they can enact change through dialogue while 57% of millennials think that it takes too much effort to alter the system (6). Finally, Gen Z cares deeply about the integrity of a company, namely brand transparency. With that being said, Gen Z feels strongly about having similar values and opinions with their preferred fashion companies (Vieira 7). Published to the Seven Bridges academic journal in 2020, Yasmina Magdy describes how brands are expected to take a stand on a range of topics to attract Gen Z consumers. This reveals the shift from passive to active consumer behavior where Gen Z opinions significantly impact brand communication. Gen Z believes that a brand should take action on the ideals by which the company has laid the foundation of its brand. This allows Gen Z consumers to have clear opinions about an issue through their purchasing tendencies (49).

A Shifting Consumer Mindset: COVID-19

While consumerism has drastically changed alongside the evolution of e-commerce, there have been significant alterations to consumer mindsets as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic as well. Firstly, the idea of re-inventing the fashion industry has become widely encouraged. Professor Idiano D'Adamo at the Unitelma Sapienza University of Rome expresses how “a more resilient, antifragile, and fair future [as it pertains to consumerism] can begin in the post-pandemic period” (1). He emphasizes the concept of a ‘circular fashion industry’ where apparel items reach their full potential for the consumer and are then designed to be recycled. McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm, sent out a survey to 2,000 consumers in the wake of the pandemic lockdown. The results were conclusive in the shifting mindset as pointed out by D'Adamo. 65% of the respondents affirmed that they were not opposed to delaying new apparel collections. In addition, 70% expressed their need for brand transparency about sustainable considerations in their business models. Finally, 71% of respondents, most of whom are Gen Z and millennials, have turned to a habit of purchasing second-hand clothing (Granskog 8). These results reveal that there has been a significant change in the mindset. D'Adamo refers to the Copenhagen Fashion Summit held in 2021 that further extends the argument on these exact alterations. The phrase ‘take, make, dispose of’ is being thrown out the window by the world’s leaders in sustainable fashion companies. Among the ideas presented, the most impactful ideas include implementing a reusable strategy, enforcing traceability of a product, and utilizing efficient methods for energy conservation (D'Adamo 3). All in all, the change in the mindset of Gen Z consumers is significant and warrants a much closer look.

Gap in Research

Recent literature falls short in its lack of information about the implications of COVID-19 on Gen Z consumerism. While studies that explore different fashion brands, whether sustainable or fast fashion, can be found, there is a lack of modernity in the ideas presented since worldly events can significantly alter consumerism. This study will hone in on Gen Z consumers in the United States where fashion and trends are at their forefront. The hypothesis of this paper is that fast fashion and sustainable brands have increased their focus on sustainability and decreased their focus on regular clothing advertisements in order to respond to the change in the Gen Z consumer mindset.

Methodology

According to Klaus Krippendorff at the University of Pennsylvania, Content analysis is defined as a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (18). The goal of this methodology is to collect qualitative data and then convert it into quantitative data that proves an observation within groups of individuals during a selected time period. An investigation into how fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands are marketing to Gen Z after the 2020 pandemic provided insight into the alterations of marketing strategies. This method allowed for quantitative and qualitative analysis and left little room for obstructions from the opinion of the researcher. Considering direct observation of fashion brand marketing is not possible due to company confidentiality, conducting a Content Analysis is a good alternative as it overcomes this limitation. That said, this research looked into the communication trends used for an individual group, being Gen Z. This content was taken and reviewed from sources that could be found online. The media chosen for this study was Instagram since it provided social media posts that could be traced back from before the pandemic started through today. According to Statista, 30.1% of Instagram users are aged 18-24 and 8.5% are ages 13-17 making Gen Z a large presence on this platform (1). This makes for an efficient form of data collection considering Gen Z has a plethora of opportunities to present their beliefs to a digital audience.

Population

The region that the researcher looked at was the United States. There are currently 332.4 million people in the country with Generation Z making up 20.35% (Statista 1). To reiterate, the age range for Gen Z is between 1995 and 2010 (Francis 2).

Brands

In order to select the brands needed, the researcher needed to define what fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands looked like. The researcher defined sustainable fashion as brands designed, manufactured, and distributed in environmentally conscious ways. In addition, the researcher defined fast fashion as cheap and trendy clothing produced by mass-market retailers. With that, the researcher found a total of ten brands on Instagram—five sustainable and five fast fashion—with the most followers. More followers allow for a more accurate understanding of marketing alterations. The sustainable fashion brands were Patagonia, Reformation, Pact, Afends, and Marah Hoffman. Through investigating the Instagram pages of each fashion brand, the researcher found that all of these brands had between 150,000 and 4.7 million followers. The fast fashion brands were Urban Outfitters, H&M, BooHoo, Zara, and Forever 21. These brands all had between 9 million and 50 million followers. Data was collected from the following Instagram accounts:

Patagonia

<https://www.instagram.com/patagonia/>

Reformation

<https://www.instagram.com/reformation/>

Pact

https://www.instagram.com/_pact_/

Afends

<https://www.instagram.com/afends/>

Marah Hoffman

<https://www.instagram.com/marahoffman/>

Boohoo

<https://www.instagram.com/boohoo/>

Uniqlo

<https://www.instagram.com/uniqlo/>

Urban Outfitters

<https://www.instagram.com/urbanoutfitters/>

Zara

<https://www.instagram.com/zara/>

Forever 21

<https://www.instagram.com/forever21/>

Content analysis (Quantitative & Qualitative)

Published in 2009, researcher Naorem Binita Devi in the Department of Psychology at the Mizoram University describes content analysis as “increasingly employed as a means to facilitate data analysis of researchers in the field of marketing and [social] media studies” (1). Similarly, a book published by Oxford University in 2016 elaborates on social media being a justified instrument for content analysis review (Drisko 2). In this study, content analysis allowed for the examination of social media content produced by the ten brands chosen. The researcher examined posts found on the official Instagram pages for each brand ranging from 2019 to 2021. Each post was inspected for words or phrases that referred to factors that drive Gen Z purchasing tendencies. Words like ‘Brand Transparency’, ‘Sustainability’, and ‘Trendy’ were collected and categorized. The researcher used these categories to reveal alterations to marketing from before the pandemic (2019-202) and during (2020-2021). The researcher also utilized pie charts to disclose the percentage of each category which determined the prevalent marketing strategies for both brand models.

Instruments

Google Sheets was used to record and categorize the data to make pie charts. The purpose of the categories shown in the screenshot below is so the researcher consistently followed multiple stages in order to record and properly categorize the data. The first column expressed the date, as data was recorded once a week for each brand. The second column indicated the first round of categorizing the posts by type under the title of “Advertisement”. In the third column, the researcher copied the caption of each post, and the fourth column was the official categorization of each post. In addition to Google Sheets, the researcher also used an online weekly calculator in order to space out the timing for each Instagram post over the specified time.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
1	Date	Advertisement	Caption	Category											
2	5/3/2021	Mental health	Reminders you r	Mental Health											
3	4/28/2021	Body positivity	Style has no siz	Mental Health											
4	4/19/2021	Mental health	Being happy is ll	Mental Health											
5	4/12/2021	Clothing advertis	Wardrobe essen	Regular Clothing advertisement											
6	4/5/2021	consumer engag	WINNER 1	consumer engagement											
7	3/29/2021	Clothing advertis	You buying new	Regular Clothing advertisement											
8	3/22/2021	Clothing advertis	Give your jogger	Regular Clothing advertisement											
9	3/15/2021	Mental health	Say "see ya" to t	Mental Health											
10	3/8/2021	Clothing advertis	90's Tonal Callin	Regular Clothing advertisement											
11	3/1/2021	Clothing advertis	A whole mood.	Regular Clothing advertisement											
12	2/22/2021	Partenerij with ii	Less than 24 ho	consumer engagement											
13	2/15/2021	International Wo	Be Part of Our V	Civic engagement											
14	2/8/2021	Bigger Model	Staple colourway	Civic engagement											
15	2/1/2021	Mental health	Hello February..	Mental Health											
16	1/25/2021	Self Confidence	Self-confidence i	Mental Health											
17	1/18/2021	Clothing advertis	Every day fits	Regular Clothing advertisement											
18	1/11/2021	Shoe Advertisen	Dreamy kicks	Regular Clothing advertisement											
19	1/4/2021	Influencer Colab	60 seconds with	consumer engagement											
20	12/28/2020	Athletic clothing	Max Preformanc	consumer engagement											
21	12/21/2020	accessory adver	Keep it colourful	consumer engagement											
22	12/14/2020	Mental health	Walk away from	Mental Health											
23	12/7/2020	Clothing advertis	The Party Isn't C	Regular Clothing advertisement											
24	11/30/2020	Stand out	Don't blend in	Civic engagement											
25	11/23/2020	Mental health	Your weekly rem	Mental Health											
26	11/16/2020	Clothing advertis	ELEVATED	Regular Clothing advertisement											
27	11/9/2020	Clothing advertis	OFFICIAL SZN I	Regular Clothing advertisement											
28	11/2/2020	Clothing advertis	Fresh Fits	Regular Clothing advertisement											
29	10/26/2020	Stand out	Don't blend in	Civic engagement											
30	10/19/2020	Mental health	Fresh week, fres	Mental Health											
31	10/12/2020	Clothing advertis	Denim takes sha	Regular Clothing advertisement											
32	10/5/2020	Clothing advertis	Street wear flex	Regular Clothing advertisement											
33	9/28/2020	Clothing advertis	Double Denim of	Regular Clothing advertisement											
34	09/14/2020	Clothing advertis	Uniqlo lets Me	Regular Clothing advertisement											

Procedure

The social media accounts were found through the Instagram search function. The terms used to find the brands were “Sustainable Fashion”, “Ethical Fashion”, and “Fast Fashion.” Every weekly post starting from January 1st, 2019 to May 3rd, 2022 was reviewed and collected in Google Sheets for their main idea. It should be noted that these dates were chosen to ensure the analysis covered data beginning before the onset of the pandemic. The researcher split the data into a “before” section and a “during” section. For the sake of this paper, the pandemic started on March 9th, 2020 meaning that any dates before that time were considered “before,” and any dates after were considered “during”. Each post was analyzed and the researcher looked for singular words or phrases of up to 3 words. The researcher elected an open-coding framework, such that the categories stated were created throughout the process of collecting data. For example, posts that looked at brand transparency were coded into words that fit multiple other posts to draw conclusions. Then, the phrases were transferred into categories and percentages by the factors that drive Gen Z consumerism. Lastly, the categories were visually represented using pie charts formed using Google Sheets. All of the data that was collected was only available to the researcher and will be made available to the public if approved to do so.

Results and Data Analysis

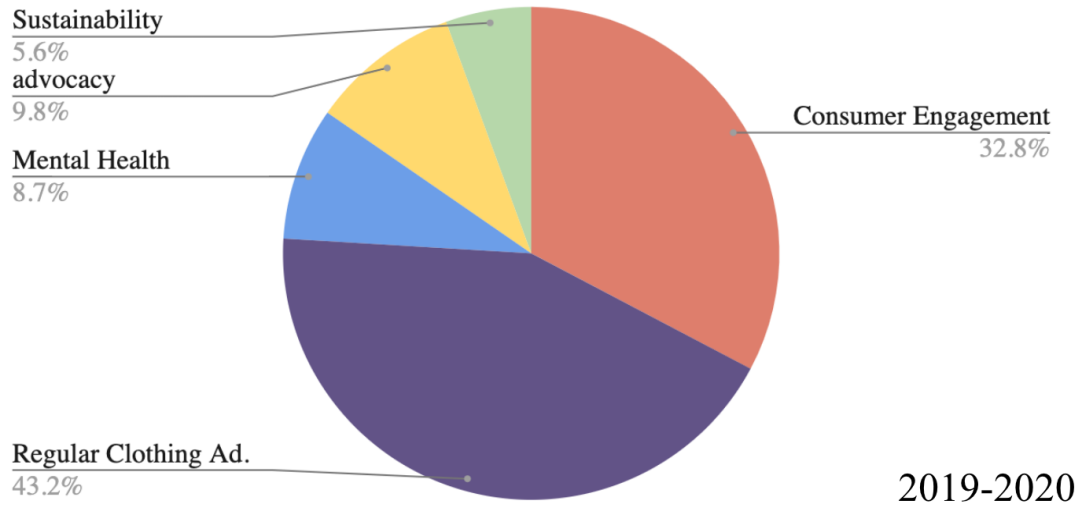
The following pie charts use five criteria for categorizing the Instagram posts. These include sustainability, advocacy, consumer engagement, mental health, and regular clothing advertisements. The researcher analyzed a total of 1,200 Instagram posts and organized them based on these categories. 600 posts were analyzed for the fast fashion brands and 600 posts were analyzed for the sustainable fashion brands. To give an example, when a post highlighted body positivity, the researcher placed said post under the category of mental health. The following quantitative coding map shows the researcher's thought process when categorizing the Instagram posts.

Figure 1: Social media posts used over the span on 10 brands between 2019 and 2021, Final Quantitative Coding Map

1.	Sustainability
	1a1. Water Usage
	1a2. Recycling
	1a3. Reduce Carbon Footprint
2.	Advocacy
	2a. LGBTQIA+ advocacy
	2b. Black Lives Matter movement
	2c. Female empowerment
	2d. Education rights
3.	Mental Health
	3a. Body Positivity
	3b. Tackling depression/anxiety
4.	Consumer Engagement
	4a. Brand Transparency
	4b. Feedback messages
5.	Regular Clothing Advertisement
	5a. Posts solely looking at clothing

Graphs

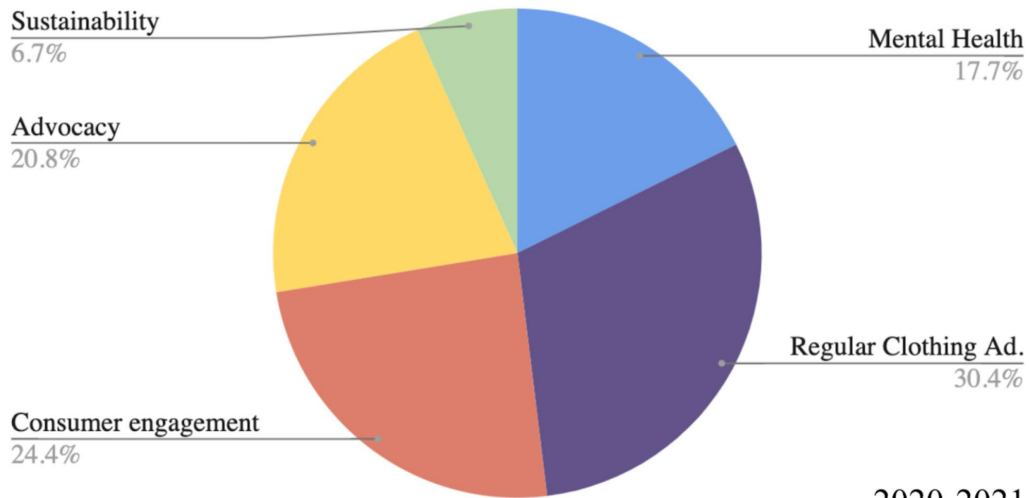
Distribution of Fast Fashion Marketing Strategies Between 5 Fast Fashion Brands **Before** the Pandemic (Using Instagram)



2019-2020

Figure 1. Fast Fashion Before the Pandemic

Distribution of Fast Fashion Marketing Strategies Between 5 Fast Fashion Brands **During** the Pandemic (Using Instagram)



2020-2021

Figure 2. Fast Fashion During the Pandemic

Distribution of Sustainable Fashion Marketing Strategies Between 5 Sustainable Fashion Brands **Before** the Pandemic (Using Instagram)

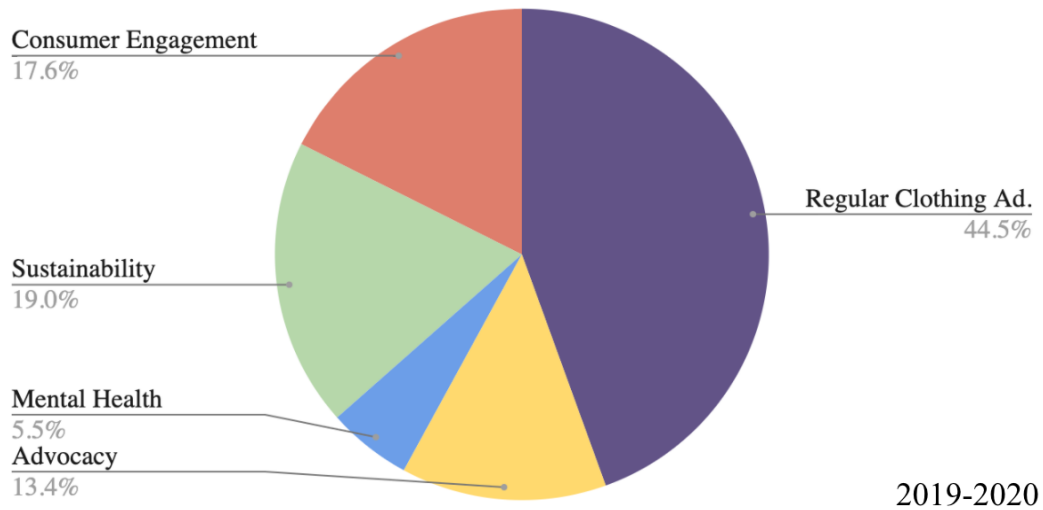


Figure 3. Sustainable Fashion Before the Pandemic

Distribution of Sustainable Fashion Marketing Strategies Between 5 Sustainable Fashion Brands **During** the Pandemic (Using Instagram)

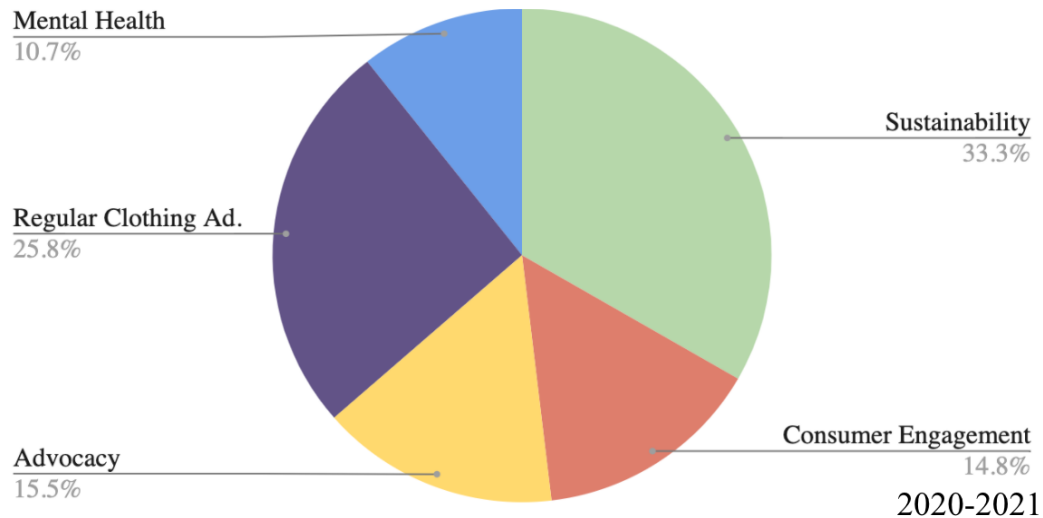


Figure 4. Sustainable Fashion During the Pandemic

Fast Fashion Brands

When analyzing the data collected, the most unexpected change for fast fashion brands was the 9 percentage point increase in brands posting about mental health during the pandemic (17.7%) compared to before the pandemic (8.7%). As poised by Yasmina Madgy in her article published in the Seven Bridges journal, Gen Z believes that their consumer ideologies should reflect in business models (49). That said, it is perfectly plausible that the increase in mental health posts was a result of increased stress on mental health. Figure 2 is a screenshot taken directly from fast fashion brand Boohoo's Instagram page. Posted in November of 2021, it depicts an example of mental health awareness after the wake of the pandemic. With the repeating phrase "I love myself,

I believe in myself, I support myself”, the viewer of the post is encouraged to take on healthier mindsets when viewing themselves.

A more expected change was the shift from regular clothing advertisement posts before the pandemic (43.2%) to during (30.4%). This 12.8 percentage point decrease exposes the idea posed by Magdy in that Gen Z consumers want, and expect, to see their beliefs showcased on brand social media (49). Before the pandemic, the number of Instagram posts concerning sustainability was relatively low (5.6%). During the pandemic, the percentage slightly increased (6.7%). As D’Adamo explained, there has been a shift in fashion brand models to accommodate Gen Z’s increased vigilance on environmental issues (3). While the increase is clear, it is slightly unexpected that there was only a 1.1 percentage point increase in these posts. The researcher hypothesized that there would be a major increase in sustainability posting, similar to that of sustainable fashion brands. It is possible; however, that fast fashion brands realize that they have a long way to go to address their own impact on sustainability and therefore choose to minimize it. The increase in posts regarding advocacy was also striking from before the pandemic (9.8%) to during (20.8%). These advocacy posts included a range of ideas from LGBTQIA+ rights to education. This makes for one of the largest increases of 11 percentage points from before the pandemic. Figure 3 is a screenshot taken from the Instagram account for Zara, another fast fashion brand, in June of 2020. With civic unrest pertaining to race in the United States occurring during this time, this post advocates the phrase “We stand for equality”. Similar to figure 2, this post represents one of the many ways that brands advocate for social issues on their platforms. A viewer such as Gen Z may view this post and feel confident in their consumerism by standing behind a brand that stands up for civic issues. The final section, consumer engagement, saw an 8.4% percentage point decrease in posting before the pandemic (32.8%) to during (24.4%). As cited by Dong Shen in his survey of 500 college students, brand transparency was one of the most significant aspects that Gen Z consumers look for (137). The data, however, shows a decrease in posts in this category, going against Shen’s notions. In summation, the categories that changed the most after the pandemic were the increase in advocacy and the decrease in regular clothing advertisements.

Sustainable Fashion Brands

Figure 2: Boohoo Instagram Post



Figure 3: Zara Instagram Post



The observed shifts in marketing strategies within sustainable brands were quite different from fast fashion brands. Firstly, sustainability was the category that increased the most from before (19%) to during (33.3%) the pandemic. This 14.3 percentage point increase signifies that most brands put high emphasis on continuing their pursuit of sustainability. Figure 4 is a screenshot taken from the Instagram account of a

Figure 4: Pact Instagram Post



sustainable fashion brand called Pact. This post highlights the brand's lessened amount of water usage which falls under the category of sustainability. As previously explained by Zhanna Kutsenkova in her study on the purchasing behaviors of consumers of sustainable fashion, many consumers feel satisfaction from purchasing environmentally conscious products as they help support the environment (11). With this post advocating for "Less water usage", the consumers feel this satisfaction. Following sustainability, the second-biggest increase was the postings on mental health. There was a 5.2 percentage point increase from before (5.5%) to during (10.7%) the pandemic. Similar to that of fast fashion brands, mental health awareness is very important to Gen Z making it easy to understand why brands increased their posting on mental health. Next, advocacy stayed relatively stagnant with only a 2.1 percentage point increase from before (13.4%) to during (15.5%). Similarly, consumer engagement started relatively high before the pandemic (17.6%) and decreased by only 2.8 percentage points (14.8%). Finally, the biggest change was in regular clothing advertisements decreasing a staggering 18.7 percentage points throughout the pandemic. Before, regular clothing ads took up nearly half of all posting (44.5%), but during they decreased to roughly one-fourth (25.8%). Figure 5 is a screenshot taken from sustainable fashion brand, Reformation. In comparison to other posts, this post solely advertises the clothing item. With that said, these types of posts have greatly decreased to make room for other posts mainly pertaining to social issues around the world. So, the biggest alterations to social media marketing for sustainable fashion brands lie within the 18.7 percentage point decrease in regular clothing advertisements followed by the 14.3 percentage point increase in sustainability postings.

Figure 5: Reformation Instagram Post



Limitations and Implications

It is important to understand how the limitations of this study control the validity of the researcher's conclusions. Firstly, the researcher only focused on ten brands out of the thousands of brands around the world. While a significant sum of posts was collected, the results should be taken with a grain of salt in that the researcher could have had completely different trends and results if other brands were chosen. It should also be noted that the researcher had to follow a strict time limit in conducting research, limiting the number of brands to be analyzed. Secondly, Gen Z is not the only group on Instagram. Many other age groups use Instagram regularly and there is no way to be completely sure that the viewership of these brands fell solely within the Gen Z age range. This means that while the researcher can explain the alterations to marketing strategies, they cannot be fully certain that these alterations specifically target Gen Z.

Thirdly, some of the ten businesses did not post regularly. In order to collect equal data, the researcher had to select posts that had the closest date to the one that was not posted. This limitation impacts the conclusions made in that some of the data was not posted on the exact same date, making it difficult to make exact inferences on how time altered marketing strategies. It is also important to consider the researcher's bias. In this case, the ideas and beliefs of the researcher could have impacted the interpretation of the data. Though the researcher did what they could to remain objective, bias could have impacted the data collection without the researcher being aware. Finally, any conclusions made from this research cannot be fully certain because of the Triple Variable Problem. This problem states that two variables that seemingly have a connection could be entirely caused by a third variable (Zach 1). In short, this limitation means that any conclusions made by the researcher could be coincidental. That said, all of these limitations have major implications for the accuracy of the results of this research paper.

Future Directions

Future research concerning sustainable and fast fashion marketing because of the pandemic could further elaborate on the research question. Future researchers could consider doing a content analysis of a larger scale of brands to more accurately predict how marketing strategies have changed. In addition, if not for the time constraint, the researcher would have analyzed the social media posts within the year 2022 in order to see the differences between before, during, and after the pandemic. Also, to further the argument of how certain marketing strategies have been altered, future researchers could conduct a correlational analysis by comparing the sales reports of each brand in correlation to the category of Instagram post that has changed the most. For example, the 9 percentage point increase in mental health posting for fast fashion brands could be compared to the sales reports to see if there was an increase in revenue as a result of an increase in mental health posting. This correlational analysis approach could be very effective in distinguishing the most effective marketing strategies when targeting Gen Z.

Conclusion

This research paper aimed to answer the question “How have fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands adapted their social media marketing to target Generation Z in The United States as a result of the pandemic?” As shown in the results, the biggest adaptations to marketing strategies for both fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands were the decrease in regular clothing advertisements and the increase in mental health posting. Interestingly, only sustainable fashion brands saw a significant increase in sustainable posting, while fast fashion brands saw a less significant increase, contrary to the researcher's hypothesis. This may be because the fast fashion industry still lags behind on sustainable business practices in general, however, further research is required to uncover the actual underlying reasons for this. Furthermore, where fast fashion brands lacked in sustainable postings, they made up for in increased advocacy postings, reflecting each brand model's relative strengths.

This research provides some understanding of the gap in knowledge regarding the modern nature of social media marketing as a result of the pandemic. Multiple groups benefit from understanding how marketing has changed. For Gen Z, knowing what areas of social issues brands concern themselves with boosts consumerism in purchasing from brands with similar beliefs and ideologies. For brands that are attempting to gain traction in the social media world, it may benefit them to understand the trends that other brands are following to keep up with current social issues trending on social media.

With Gen Z's massive online presence, it is no wonder that both fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands seem to have altered their social media marketing strategies as a result of their beliefs and tendencies. There is no doubt that brands will continue to adjust their social media marketing approach in this ever-changing online world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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