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SAME GENERATION, DIFFERENT HABITS? UNPACKING SECOND-HAND FASHION CONSUMPTION AMONG ITALIAN EARLY AND LATE GEN Z

Abstract: The environmental and social criticisms about fast-fashion have boosted interest in second-hand clothing, especially among Generation Z. This cohort values sustainability, digital engagement, and ethical consumption, increasingly aligning their purchasing decisions with environmental and circular economy concerns. While existing studies recognise Gen Z's role in driving sustainable consumption, there is limited empirical evidence from the Italian context and little exploration of intra-generational differences. This study addresses these gaps by analysing how sustainability values influence second-hand fashion among Italian Gen Z consumers, using data from 428 survey respondents and Exploratory Factor Analysis methodology. Findings reveal that sustainability, uniqueness, and identity expression are key motivations, with digital platforms playing a central role. Early Gen Z is more focused on sustainability and product quality, while late Gen Z prioritises personal style and diverse purchasing channels. These insights offer strategic implications for fashion brands and policymakers promoting circular consumption.

Key words: GENERATION Z, FAST FASHION, SECON-HAND FASHION, SUSTAINABLE CONSUPTION, CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Introduction

In recent years, sustainability has become a defining priority in both policy agendas and corporate strategies, reflecting mounting concerns over climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequalities (Becchetti et al., 2022). This shift is particularly marked in the fashion industry, where the negative externalities associated with fast fashion – including overproduction, waste generation, and exploitative labour practices – have come under increasing scrutiny (Mokyr, 1990; Bocken et al., 2014). As a response, second-hand fashion has emerged as a viable and attractive alternative for consumers seeking to align their values with their purchasing behaviour. Once stigmatised or associated with economic necessity, second-hand clothing now dominates a central place in discourses on ethical consumption and circular economy models (Djafarova and Foots, 2022).

Within this context, Generation Z – broadly defined as individuals born between 1996 and 2012 – stands out as a particularly influential demographic. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has grown up in a digital environment saturated with sustainability discourse, social media activism, and economic precarity (Seemiller and Grace, 2018). These conditions have fostered a generation that is both digitally fluent and ethically conscious, placing considerable emphasis on transparency, inclusivity, environmental protection, and social justice in their consumption choices (Dorsey and Villa, 2020; Fromm and Read, 2018). Second-hand fashion, in particular, resonates with this cohort due to its perceived authenticity, uniqueness, and alignment with ecological values (Busalim et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2023). Moreover, according to Epifani (2020) and Tovar et al. (2023), the widespread use of digital re-commerce platforms and social media has significantly lowered the barriers to entry, making second-hand shopping more accessible, normalised, and socially rewarding.

Although existing literature recognises the role of Gen Z in promoting sustainable consumption, current research presents notable limitations. First, most studies are situated within Anglo-American or global frameworks, often neglecting the cultural and symbolic importance of fashion in national contexts such as Italy. Given Italy's strong heritage in fashion production and consumption, understanding how Italian Gen Z engages with second-hand fashion offers a unique and underexplored perspective. Second, while scholars have identified key values driving Gen Z's sustainable behaviour, they rarely examine the generational heterogeneity within this group – particularly the behavioural differences between early and late Gen Z cohorts (Balon, 2024). Additionally, few studies address how digital ecosystems, such as peer-to-peer re-commerce platforms and influencer-driven content, mediate sustainable practices among youth consumers (Dabija et al., 2019; McDonald and Oates, 2006). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate how sustainability values influence second-hand fashion consumption among Italian

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Generation Z consumers. In particular, it explores the motivational, behavioural, and cultural dimensions that shape this phenomenon, paying close attention to the role of digital platforms and the intra-generational differences within Gen Z. By addressing these issues, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of youth-led sustainable consumption and provides practical insights for fashion brands, digital retailers, and policymakers seeking to promote responsible and circular consumption behaviours in culturally specific markets.

Theoretical Background

Sustainable consumption, broadly defined as the use of goods and services that meet basic needs while minimising environmental and social impacts (UNEP, 2011), has gained increasing attention in academic, institutional, and consumer discourse. Within this framework, fashion stands out as a sector of critical concern due to its resource-intensive production processes, complex global supply chains, and high ecological footprint. As critiques of fast fashion's unsustainable practices continue to intensify, second-hand fashion has emerged as a meaningful response, increasingly associated with ethical responsibility, circular economy principles, and consumer resistance to overconsumption (Bocken et al., 2014; Frank, 1997). This shift reflects not only environmental motivations but also a broader transformation in consumer values and priorities. To understand what drives this change, various theoretical models have been employed. *The Theory of Planned Behaviour* (Ajzen, 1991) is particularly useful for interpreting sustainability-oriented decisions among younger consumers. It emphasises how attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioural control jointly shape behavioural intentions. In the context of second-hand fashion, Gen Z's concern for the environment and appreciation for originality often align with social influences and a growing confidence in navigating online second-hand markets. In line with this framework, the study poses its first research question:

> **RQ1:** *What are the key factors driving second-hand fashion consumption among Italian Gen Z consumers?*

Alongside behavioural intention, sustainability values are central to shaping Gen Z's fashion-related choices. The *Stimulus-Organism-Response* (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) provides further insight into how external stimuli – such as digital content, platform design, or peer recommendations – influence internal attitudes, values, and emotions, which then drive consumer behaviour. This model highlights the relevance of both cognitive and affective processes in shaping ethical fashion practices. As Gen Z is often exposed to sustainability narratives through digital and social channels, these values become embedded in their consumption habits. This leads us to define the second research question:

RQ2: *How do sustainability values shape Gen Z's perception and adoption of second-hand fashion?*

Another key component is identity formation. As noted by Belk (1988), material possessions are deeply connected to how individuals construct and express the self. For Gen Z, second-hand fashion serves not only utilitarian purposes but also symbolic ones, enabling expressions of individuality, ethical alignment, and belonging to value-based communities. This is reinforced by literature on identity-driven consumption, which suggests that personal and social identities are shaped through what and how individuals consume (Ahuvia, 2005; Koay et al., 2022). The uniqueness, authenticity, and narrative richness of second-hand items make them particularly appealing to a generation that prioritises transparency, creativity, and meaning in their purchases. Crucially, these identity dynamics unfold within a digital environment that has redefined the second-hand fashion landscape. Platforms such as Vinted, Depop, and Vestiaire Collective have democratised access to second-hand clothing by simplifying transactions, improving trust mechanisms, and supporting user-driven content. At the same time, social media and influencer marketing play a critical role in shaping perceptions and normalising sustainable practices. Influencers aligned with environmental and aesthetic values help present second-hand fashion as aspirational rather than alternative, reinforcing Gen Z's desire for self-expression through ethical consumption (Djafarova and Foots, 2022; Epifani, 2020; Tovar et al., 2023). These developments prompt the third and final research question:

RQ3: *What role do digital platforms and social media play in facilitating and reinforcing sustainable fashion choices among Gen Z?*

Methodology and Data

To address the study's objectives, a quantitative approach was employed through an online survey targeting Italian Gen Z respondents to examine how sustainability values influence second-hand fashion consumption, focusing on motivations, behaviours, and perceived barriers among ethically aware and digitally engaged customers. After a pre-test to ensure clarity and coherence across items, the survey was distributed via Google Forms between October and December 2024, resulting in 428 valid responses. Both Likert scales (1–7) and open/multiple-choice formats were used to capture a wide spectrum of responses.

The questionnaire explored several key dimensions: First, participants' knowledge of and personal importance attributed to sustainability across environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Subsequently, it investigated

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second-hand purchasing habits, preferred shopping channels (e.g., digital and physical), as well as underlying motivations. Particular emphasis was placed on how values such as environmental concern, ethical responsibility, and identity expression shape consumer attitudes toward second-hand clothing. Additionally, the role of digital platforms, peer influence, and social media in shaping fashion choices were examined, reflecting Gen Z's hybrid consumption environment. It also explored perceived barriers (e.g., hygiene concerns, time investment, or distrust in quality) and incentives (e.g., item uniqueness, affordability, or alignment with community values) associated with second-hand shopping. Finally, socio-demographic data were collected to enable segmentation and better understand the internal diversity of the sample.

Table 1: **Sample composition**

Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Income (€)
Male, 46.5 Female, 53 Other, 0.5	18–22, 53 23–28, 47	High school or below, 30 College or university, 67 Postgraduate, 3	Student, 51 Employed, 25 Self-employed or entrepreneur, 9 Unemployed, 15	None, 49 < 999, 22 1.000–1.999, 28 ≥ 2.000, 1

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 1 outlines the sample's socio-demographic profile. The gender distribution resulted balanced, with 53.3% female and 46.5% male respondents. As for the two side of the "generational coin", Early Gen Z (53%) slightly outnumbered late Gen Z (47%). Education levels were high: 67.3% held a bachelor's or master's degree. Most participants were students (50.9%), followed by employees (25.2%) and job seekers (15%). Income levels were generally low, with 48.6% reporting no income and 50% earning below €2,000 monthly, thus reflecting the young age and early career stage of the sample. Overall, our composition provides a solid foundation for exploring second-hand fashion behaviour among Italian Gen Z, allowing us for comparisons across subgroups based on age, education, and income.

Results

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics to identify the underlying dimensions of consumer behaviour related to second-hand fashion among Italian Gen Z (Abdi and Williams, 2010). To deeply explore generational differences, the sample was divided into the two subgroups – e.g., Early and Late Gen Z – as differences in their developmental and socio-cultural backgrounds may influence their perceptions of sustainability and second-hand consumption.

At first, correlation analysis confirmed that all the selected variables were relevant, showing positive associations across both subgroups. To assess the data suitability, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) were applied. Both subgroups met the required thresholds (KMO > 0.7; BTS $p < 0.05$), thus confirming the robustness of the datasets. Communality tests' values indicated strong explanatory power, with 75.1% of total variance explained in the Early Gen Z subgroup and 82.7% in the Late Gen Z subgroup. Based on these results, six factors were extracted for Early Gen Z and four for Late Gen Z, offering a clear structure of the motivational and behavioural dimensions behind second-hand fashion choices. A detailed overview for each subgroup is provided in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2: Summary of the Early Gen Z latent factors

EARLY GEN Z		
	Latent factor	*Description*
1	*Motivations for Second-hand Purchase*	Represents the main drivers behind Early Gen Z's interest in second-hand fashion. It highlights the search for an aesthetic linked to sustainability and originality, with attention to the practical benefits of second-hand purchasing.
2	*Quality and Origin of Second-hand Items*	Reflects Early Gen Z's concern for the quality, origin, and brand reputation of purchased items. It includes variables related to trust in product characteristics and economic savings.
3	*Purchase Decision and Trust*	Emphasises the role of trust in the purchasing process. Decisions are influenced by seller reputation, user reviews, and perceived product quality based on available images and information.
4	*Alternative Purchasing Channels*	Refers to second-hand purchasing methods beyond mainstream platforms like Vinted. It captures the importance of availability, convenience, and affordability in the shopping experience.
5	*Community and Sharing*	Explores the relationship between the sense of belonging to a community, individualistic motivations, and the sample's socio-demographic features. It includes variables related to age and gender.
6	*Income*	Represents the economic capacity and mindful purchasing behaviour of Early Gen Z, with a focus on managing limited financial resources.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

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Table 3: **Summary of the Late Gen Z latent factors**

LATE GEN Z		
	Latent factor	*Description*
1	*Motivations for Second-hand Purchase*	Represents the main purchasing motivations of Late Gen Z. It highlights personal identity construction, perceived quality, and a strong connection to sustainability and authenticity through second-hand fashion.
2	*Purchasing Methods*	Refers to more traditional shopping formats, such as flea markets and physical stores. It reflects Late Gen Z's renewed interest in tangible, in-person second-hand shopping experiences.
3	*Sustainability and Alternative Channels*	Emphasises the role of digital and alternative platforms in second-hand purchases, linked to values such as sustainability, convenience, and uniqueness in product selection.
4	*Gender*	Dominated by the socio-demographic variable of gender. The predominance of male respondents suggests potential gender-based differences in second-hand fashion interest and purchasing behaviour.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study highlights the complexity and internal diversity of Generation Z in their approach to second-hand fashion consumption. Segmenting the sample into Early and Late Gen Z revealed distinct behavioural and motivational patterns, underscoring the importance of intra-generational analysis. Early Gen Z demonstrated a structured set of motivations, combining sustainability awareness, attention to product quality, and a strong reliance on trust and social validation. Their behaviours suggest a collective orientation, where transparency, ethical sourcing, and community values play a significant role. Financial constraints also emerged as a relevant factor, reinforcing the link between conscious consumption and budget sensitivity. In contrast, Late Gen Z exhibited a more individualistic and expressive profile. Identity construction and authenticity were central to their motivations, with less emphasis on collective ethics and more focus on uniqueness and self-representation. Interestingly, this subgroup showed a renewed interest in physical second-hand shopping experiences – such as thrift stores and flea markets – indicating a desire for tangible, curated alternatives to digital platforms. Sustainability remained important, but was interpreted through a more personalised lens, integrated with aesthetic and experiential considerations.

These findings directly address the study's research questions. Regarding RQ1, the key drivers of second-hand fashion differ significantly between the two cohorts,

ranging from ethical concerns and trust to identity and aesthetics. In relation to RQ2, sustainability values are influential but framed differently: Early Gen Z links them to collective responsibility, while Late Gen Z internalises them as part of individual expression. Concerning RQ3, digital platforms and social media are essential enablers, but Late Gen Z shows signs of platform fatigue, favouring hybrid or offline alternatives. For brands and re-commerce platforms, these insights call for tailored engagement strategies. Early Gen Z may respond better to campaigns focused on ethics, transparency, and social proof, while Late Gen Z values authenticity, creativity, and hybrid experiences. Enhancing digital usability, offering personalised content, and embedding sustainability into brand storytelling are effective across both segments.

In conclusion, this study enriches the understanding of Gen Z's role in sustainable consumption, showing that second-hand fashion is not only an ethical choice but also a mode of identity expression shaped by digital and cultural contexts.

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ИСТА ГЕНЕРАЦИЈА, РАЗЛИЧИТЕ НАВИКЕ? АНАЛИЗА КУПОВИНЕ ПОЛОВНЕ МОДЕ МЕЂУ РАНОМ И КАСНОМ ГЕНЕРАЦИЈОМ ЗЕД У ИТАЛИЈИ

Сажетак: Еколошке и друштвене критике усмерене на брзу моду подстакле су интересовање за половну одећу, посебно међу припадницима Генерације Зед. Ова генерација вреднује одрживост, дигиталну повезаност и етичку потрошњу, све више усклађујући своје куповне одлуке са питањима заштите животне средине и циркуларне економије. Иако постојећа истраживања препознају улогу Генерације Зед у подстицању одрживе потрошње, емпиријски докази из италијанског контекста су ограничени, као и истраживања унутаргенерацијских разлика. Ова студија се бави тим празнинама анализирајући како вредности одрживости утичу на куповину половне моде међу италијанским потрошачима из Генерације Зед, користећи податке од 428 испитаника и методологију експлоаторне факторске анализе. Резултати показују да су одрживост, јединственост и изражавање идентитета главни мотиви, при чему дигиталне платформе играју кључну улогу. Рана Генерација Зед више се фокусира на одрживост и квалитет производа, док касна Генерација Зед даје приоритет личном стилу и разноврсним каналима куповине. Ови увиди нуде стратешке импликације за модне брендове и доносиоце одлука који промовишу циркуларну потрошњу.

Кључне речи: ГЕНЕРАЦИЈА ЗЕД, БРЗА МОДА, ПОЛОВНА МОДА, ОДРЖИВА ПОТРОШЊА, ПОНАШАЊЕ ПОТРОШАЧА