

GREENWASHING IN THE MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABLE FASHION COMPANIES: THE ATTITUDES OF GENERATION Y AND Z

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the perception of the credibility of environmental claims of fashion brands among Czech consumers of generation Y and Z and the possibilities of communication that minimizes the risk of greenwashing. The aim is to identify the key factors influencing the purchasing behaviour of these generations in the sustainable fashion market and to describe their attitudes towards the credibility of sustainability marketing messages. A combination of situational analysis of secondary data and a primary questionnaire survey in the period March–April 2024 is used. The sample consists of 368 respondents born between 1980 and 2010 selected according to their age. Dependencies are tested by Pearson's chi-square independence test at a significance level of 5%, the intensity of association is measured by Cramér's V. It was found that 68% of respondents are more likely to distrust marketing claims about the sustainability of fashion brands, and 65.5% say they would not buy from a brand convicted of greenwashing. Confidence in environmental claims is not statistically dependent on the age of the respondent or the frequency of purchases of slow fashion, but it is weakly but statistically significantly dependent on the knowledge of the concept of greenwashing and on the frequency of its feeling when buying clothes. Transparent communication about the origin of materials and production processes increases consumer trust for 58.7% of respondents. The results support the conclusion that greenwashing risk reduction is based primarily on the transparency, authenticity and traceability of the message, not on the intensity of the communication itself.

Keywords: greenwashing, sustainable fashion, slow fashion, marketing communication, generation y, generation z, consumer trust, transparency

JEL Code: M31, M37, Q56



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1 INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become an important part of corporate strategies and consumer decisions in recent years. In response to the growing demand for environmentally friendly products, companies are adapting their products, production processes and marketing communications to reflect environmental issues. However, when these claims are unfounded, simplistic or misleading, greenwashing occurs, which is defined in the literature as the dissemination of misleading or false information about a company's environmental activities or about the environmental benefits of its products and services (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). This phenomenon undermines consumer trust, damages brand reputations, and weakens the position of honest producers, whose claims are lost in a flood of generic phrases such as „sustainable“ or „natural.“

The fashion industry is one of the sectors where the issue of greenwashing is particularly serious. The global fashion industry is responsible for 4–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions from human activities, and the entire value chain is characterised by high water consumption, pollution of water resources and textile waste production (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). Almost 60% of all newly produced garments are thrown away within one year of production, and textile materials make up a substantial part of mixed waste, making fashion one of the most unsustainable consumer segments. Fast fashion builds on low prices, short production cycles and frequent changes of collections, which motivates impulsive purchases and short lifespans of clothes. An alternative is the concept of slow fashion, which emphasizes quality, production ethics and a longer product life cycle (Jung and Jin, 2014; Štefko and Steffek, 2018). In response to the increased demand for sustainable products, some fast fashion brands have expanded their offerings to include so-called sustainable collections, but their credibility is often questioned in connection with greenwashing. In this context, there is a growing focus on how brands communicate their environmental commitments and how consumers respond to such communications.

Generation Y (born approximately 1980–1995) and Generation Z (born approximately 1996–2010) represent segments with high sensitivity to environmental issues and corporate social responsibility. Generation Z is often referred to as the „green generation“ — sustainability influences their purchasing decisions, prefers manufacturers with responsible strategies, and actively monitors the environmental impacts of their behavior (Wawer *et al.*, 2022). Generation Y is already fully involved in the market in terms of purchasing power, and both generations account for a growing share of the sustainable clothing market. At the same time, skepticism about environmental claims is increasing: consumers are increasingly critical of general „green“ formulations and are more likely to verify that real brand practices correspond to them (Samal and Bhalala, 2023). Adamkiewicz *et al.* (2022) confirm that reducing greenwashing, together with increasing the transparency of marketing communications, significantly contributes to strengthening trust in green products.

On the regulatory level, the European Commission responded to the expansion of greenwashing in 2023 with a proposal for a directive on green claims, which aims to increase the reliability, comparability and verifiability of environmental communications (European Commission, 2023). At the same time, however, there is a lack of primary data on how generations Y and Z in the Czech Republic perceive the credibility of fashion brands' marketing claims and how these perceptions are related to their knowledge of greenwashing and experience with it. International studies suggest that familiarity with greenwashing leads to higher skepticism and a departure from the brands in which it has been detected (Nosto, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2018), but the Czech

empirical evidence in the fashion segment remains limited. Existing domestic studies focus mainly on general consumer attitudes towards sustainability, not on the relationship between knowledge of greenwashing, the perceived credibility of environmental claims and subsequent purchasing decisions. This post tries to fill that gap.

The aim of the paper is to identify the key factors influencing the purchasing behavior of generations Y and Z on the Czech fashion market and to evaluate their attitudes towards the credibility of marketing claims about the sustainability of products and brands. In particular, attention is paid to whether trust in environmental claims depends on age, on the frequency of purchases of slow fashion, on the knowledge of the concept of greenwashing and on the frequency of its feeling when buying clothes. Based on these findings, communication principles for sustainable fashion businesses are formulated that minimize the risk of greenwashing.

2 METHODOLOGY AND DATA

To fulfil the aim of the paper, a combination of situational analysis of secondary data and primary quantitative questionnaire survey was chosen. The situational analysis was based on freely available statistical sources, in particular data from the Czech Statistical Office on the age distribution of the population (CZSO, 2022), and provided a framework for defining target generations and their quota representation. The main empirical conclusions are based on the primary investigation.

The target population consists of Czech consumers born between 1980 and 2010, who correspond to generations Y and Z. To capture the internal heterogeneity of these cohorts, the population was divided into four age quotas: 2003–2010, 1996–2002, 1988–1995 and 1980–1987. The relative abundance of individual quotas in the basic population was determined according to the CZSO as of 31 January 2022 (see Table 1).

Data collection took place electronically via the Google Forms platform in the period from 25 March to 16 April 2024. The questionnaire was preceded by a pilot phase on two people from each age quota to identify ambiguities or errors in wording. The distribution took place via social networks Facebook, Instagram and the streaming platform Twitch, as well as by e-mail and in person at the youth home. A total of 376 responses were obtained, of which 368 valid observations remained after discarding incomplete or inconsistent records. In terms of representativeness, the sample in the 2003–2010 and 1988–1995 quotas is in very good agreement with the basic population; Larger deviations are evident in the 1996–2002 quota (7.04 percentage point higher) and in

Tab. 1 Structure of quota sampling by age — comparison of the population of the CZSO and the questionnaire survey

Generations	Year of birth	Population of the Czech Republic (%)	Surveys (%)
Generation Z	2003–2010	23,76	25,00
Generation Z	1996–2002	18,23	25,27
Generation Y	1988–1995	27,35	26,63
Generation Y	1980–1987	30,66	23,10

Source: own processing according to the Czech Statistical Office (2022) and data from the questionnaire survey (n = 368).

the 1980–1987 quota (7.56 percentage point lower).

The questionnaire contained a total of 22 questions structured into three thematic blocks. The first block (9 questions) examined the knowledge of the concept of greenwashing, the assessment of its severity, the frequency of its feeling when buying clothes, perceived suspicious practices and claims, and the impacts of detecting greenwashing on purchasing decisions and trust in the brand. The second block (4 questions) concerned shopping behaviour in relation to slow fashion and the importance of individual factors and aspects of sustainability in the selection of clothing. The third block (3 questions) focused on preferred communication channels, verification of sustainability claims and the importance of selected elements in sustainable fashion advertising. The conclusion of the questionnaire included identification questions. A seven-point scale was used to evaluate preferences and attitudes.

MS Excel and TIBCO Statistica 14 were used for statistical evaluation. The analysis included descriptive statistics and pivot tables for dependency testing. The existence of dependencies between variables was verified by Pearson's chi-square independence test at the chosen significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ (Tahal, 2022). In the case of statistically significant dependence, the intensity of the association was measured by the Cramér coefficient V (Hendl, 2015), which takes values from the interval (0; 1), where a zero value means no dependence and a value close to one strong dependence.

Based on existing knowledge about the relationship of trust, greenwashing awareness and buying behavior (Jacobson and Harrison, 2022; Samal and Bhalala, 2023), four null hypotheses have been established:

- **H01:** *The degree of trust in sustainability marketing claims from fashion brands does not depend on the age of the consumer.*
- **H02:** *There is no relationship between the degree of trust in marketing claims from fashion brands and the frequency of purchases of slow fashion.*
- **H03:** *There is no correlation between the degree of trust in sustainability marketing claims made by fashion brands and the knowledge of the concept of greenwashing.*
- **H04:** *There is no correlation between the level of trust in marketing claims from fashion brands and the frequency of feeling greenwashed when buying clothes.*

3 RESULTS

The sample ($n = 368$) consists of 30.4% men, 68.5% women and 1.1% persons of other gender identity. In terms of economic status, the most numerous are employees and the self-employed (48.4%), students (42.4%) and people on maternity or parental leave (7.6%). The distribution across the four age quotas ranges from 23.1 to 26.6 %, ensuring comparability of findings across generations.

3.1 Awareness of greenwashing and perception of its seriousness

A total of 72.6% of respondents have heard of the term greenwashing, with 55.2% saying they know exactly what the term means. The youngest group of 14–21 years of age has the lowest knowledge. Greenwashing is perceived as a serious problem — 48% of respondents rate it on a scale of 1–7 at levels 6 and 7. Three-quarters of participants (69%) report that they encounter greenwashing when shopping either frequently (for about half of purchases) or rarely (less than half of purchases); 16.6% of respondents believe that they have never encountered it.

3.2 Trust in the environmental claims of fashion brands

A seven-point rating of trust in sustainability marketing claims from fashion brands (1 = no trust, 7 = full trust) shows significant skepticism: 68% of respondents chose values 1, 2 or 3, i.e. rather distrust. Less than 2% of respondents chose high trust values (6 and 7).

3.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

The relationship between confidence in environmental claims and selected variables was tested by a chi-square independence test. The null hypotheses H01 and H02 cannot be rejected because the corresponding p-values exceed the determined significance level of 5% (H01: $p = 0.24137$; H02: $p = 0.43007$). Therefore, it cannot be concluded that confidence in marketing claims about sustainability is statistically dependent on the age of the consumer or on the frequency of purchases of slow fashion. On the other hand, hypotheses H03 and H04 are rejected: for H03 a p-value of 0.00045 and a Cramér $V = 0.2184$ were found, for H04 a p-value of 0.04753 and a Cramér $V = 0.1578$. In both cases, it is a weak, statistically significant dependence. The pivot tables show that the better the respondent knows the concept of greenwashing and the more often they feel it when buying clothes, the less confidence they have in marketing claims about sustainability.

3.4 Implications of greenwashing for purchasing decisions and brand reputation

When asked directly whether a respondent would buy products from a brand that noticed greenwashing, 65.5% answered that they would rather or definitely not buy them. Repeated greenwashing is perceived as a very negative impact on brand reputation (levels 6 and 7) by 51.4% of

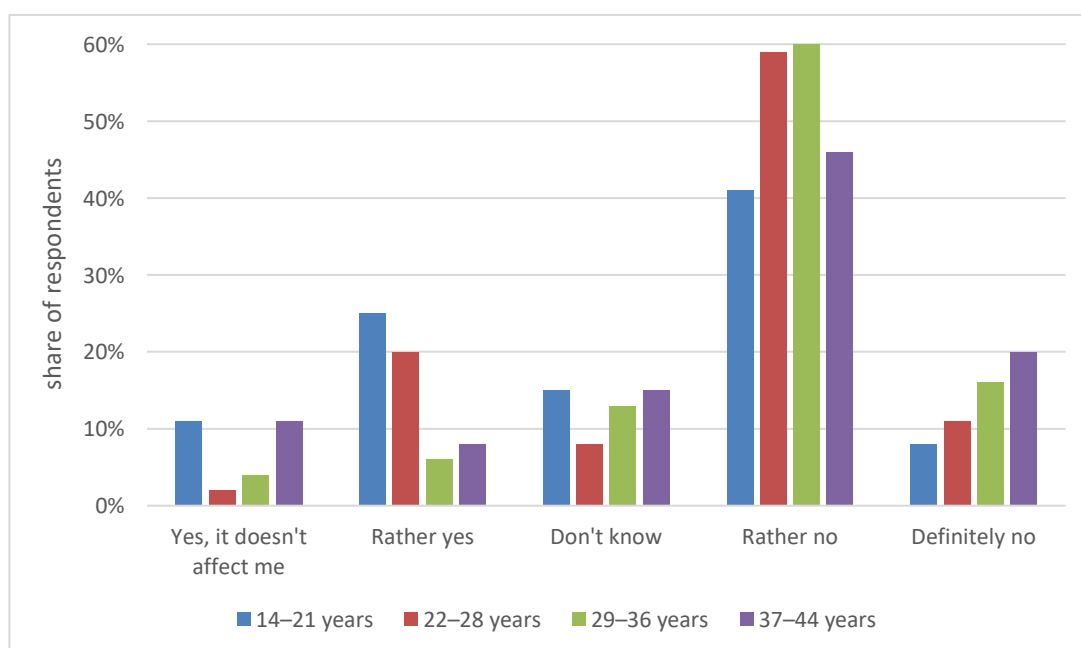


Fig. 1: Effect of greenwashing detection on the decision to purchase brand products by age group (n = 368).

respondents. A total of 35.3% of participants said that they had personally identified greenwashing in a brand they considered sustainable. Of this subgroup, 50.8% say that disclosure has fundamentally eroded their trust in the brand and reduced their willingness to endorse or recommend it in the future (levels 6 and 7). The distribution of responses by age group is illustrated in Figure 1.

3.5 Key factors when choosing clothes

The seven-point scale of importance is dominated by functional-qualitative factors: comfort (average 6.21), quality (5.99), size (5.95) and material (5.14). The price averages 5.09; sustainability 4.44; mark 2.98; Recommendations from influencers only 1.97. This preference structure shows that sustainability is not the top priority among the separately assessed factors, but it is significantly linked to the attributes that consumers put first — quality and durability. Among the aspects of sustainability, respondents consider quality and durability to be the most important (73.9% report values 6-7), natural materials and timeless design. The least importance is given to recycled materials and the general socially responsible behavior of the brand.

3.6 Perceived suspicious practices and claims

When evaluating specific marketing formulations typical of greenwashing, respondents perceive the use of unknown eco-certificates and general „green promises for the future“ (for example, reducing the carbon footprint by the following year) as the most suspicious. These findings suggest that non-specific aspirational formulations without a third party as a verifying actor are perceived as a red flag by consumers in this age group.

3.7 Communication channels and verification of claims

When shopping for sustainable fashion, respondents across age groups especially prefer social media, recommendations from friends and family, and retailer websites — these three channels dominate all four age subgroups. The younger segment of 14-21 years also adds recommendations from influencers as an important channel, while the oldest group of 37-44 years more often appreciates informational emails and newsletters. To verify sustainability claims, respondents most often use brand and certification websites; About a quarter of respondents (97 out of 368 people) also verify information on the brand's social networks and a slightly smaller share (71 people) with sustainable fashion influencers. Almost a third of respondents (30.2%) do not verify sustainability claims at all, with this share being highest in the youngest group of 14-21 years. The importance of selected elements in sustainable fashion advertising — information on materials, price, explanation of environmental terms, certificates and links to more detailed information — varies across age groups and is summarised in Figure 2.

Brand transparency has a strong effect on trust: 58.7% of respondents gave a score of 6 or 7 on a scale of 1-7 when asked whether transparent communication about the origin of materials and production processes increases their trust in a brand's sustainability claims.

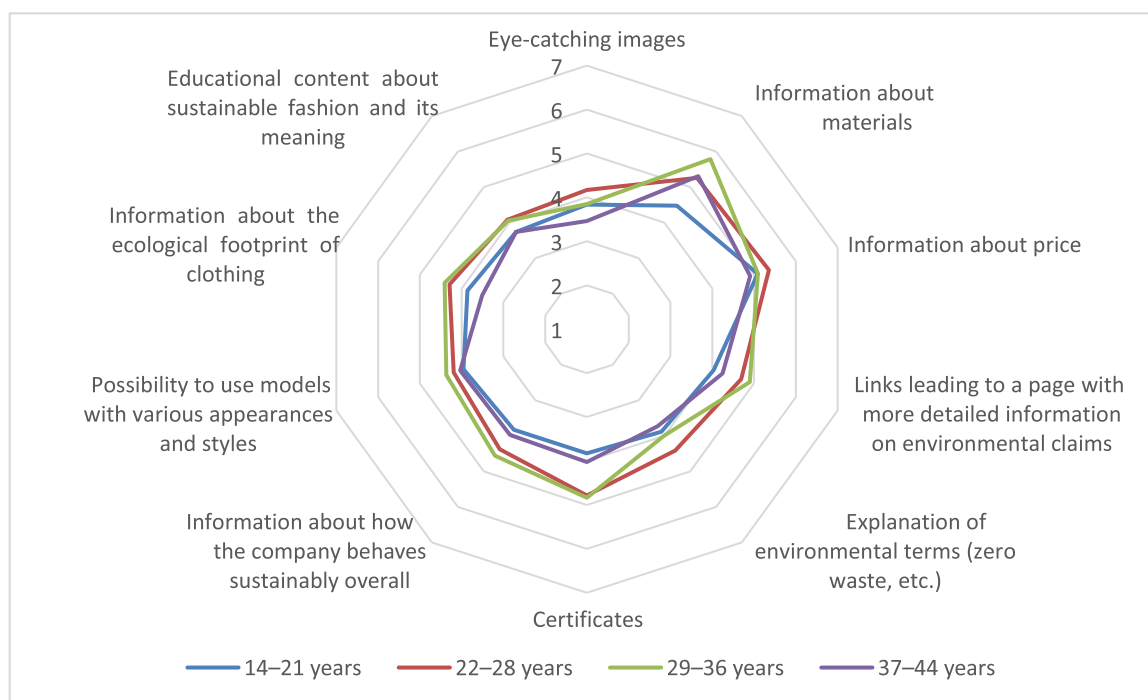


Fig. 2: Importance of individual elements in sustainable fashion advertising by age group (n = 368).

4 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the paper confirm that the Czech generation Y and Z are mostly sceptical about the environmental claims of fashion brands: 68% of respondents tend to distrust and 65.5% would not buy from a brand convicted of greenwashing. This finding is consistent with international evidence that familiarity with greenwashing increases skepticism about green claims and leads to a willingness to break the purchasing relationship with the problematic brand (Samal and Bhalala, 2023; Nosto, 2022). Also, the strong negative impact of exposed greenwashing on brand reputation corresponds to a model according to which greenwashing erodes trust and loyalty and leads to a deterioration in the customer relationship (Zhang *et al.*, 2018).

A surprising finding is that confidence in marketing sustainability claims in this study is not statistically dependent on the age of the respondent (H01 cannot be rejected). Generations Y and Z therefore form a relatively homogeneous whole within the Czech fashion market in terms of the level of scepticism towards green claims. Also, the frequency of slow fashion purchases is not related to trust in marketing claims (H02 cannot be dismissed) — this means that the decision to buy slow fashion products is not primarily driven by deep trust in the brands' message, but rather by other motives, such as quality, durability or natural materials, which dominate the ranking of factors in clothing purchases in this study. This conclusion corresponds to the view of Domingos *et al.* (2022), according to which slow-fashion consumers combine an emphasis on uniqueness, quality and authenticity with an interest in ethical and environmental values.

On the contrary, hypotheses H03 and H04 were rejected with a weak, statistically significant dependence. Respondents who are more familiar with the term greenwashing or, according to their own experience, encounter it more often when buying, have reduced trust in marketing

claims about sustainability. The weak intensity of the association (Cramér's $V = 0.2184$ for H03 and 0.1578 for H04) suggests that knowledge of greenwashing influences trust, but is not its sole or dominant source; The general level of media literacy, value orientation or experience with specific brands probably also play an important role.

A high proportion of respondents (58.7%) for whom transparent communication about the origin of materials and production processes increases trust in the brand is in line with the conclusions of Adamkiewicz *et al.* (2022), according to which more transparent marketing and reduction of greenwashing strengthen trust in green products. This result is a well-usable signal in practice: transparency is not just a defense against legal risks, but an active tool for building brand credibility.

4.1 Recommendations for practice

Based on empirical findings, four key communication principles for sustainable fashion businesses can be formulated that minimize the risk of greenwashing:

1. **Transparency and traceability.** Sustainability communications should be supported by easily traceable information on the origin of materials, production processes and certifications. A suitable tool is the publication of product stories based on life cycle analysis (LCA) on the brand's website, or linking the product to a detailed description via a QR code.
2. **Authenticity.** Brand credibility is strengthened by open communication about gradual steps, achieved goals and uncoordinated areas. Vague or aspirational promises for the future, on the other hand, are worth avoiding — according to the survey, respondents perceive them as clearly suspected of greenwashing.
3. **Caution in visual communication.** Visual greenwashing — the overuse of green color, nature motifs, leaves, and general „eco“ aesthetics with no substantiated content — is a separate form of greenwashing (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, visuals and text claims should be pre-tested with representatives of the target group.
4. **Differentiation of channels by generation.** For the youngest segment of 14-21 years old, social networks (Instagram, YouTube) are key, for older representatives of Generation Y, sellers' websites and recommendations from friends and family are becoming increasingly important. Collaborating with selected micro-influencers in the sustainability segment can strengthen brand credibility, provided that the influencer has an authentic relationship to the topic — the influencer's perceived authenticity towards sustainability is key to follower trust, while combining sustainable and unsustainable partnerships weakens credibility (Jacobson and Harrison, 2022).

4.2 Contribution limits

The study should be interpreted with three main limitations in mind. First, the sample is not fully representative, with the representation of respondents in two of the four age quotas deviating from the population by more than 7 percentage points. Second, the segmentation was carried out exclusively by age, without psychographic or behavioral variables that can influence the perception of greenwashing more significantly than age; Further research could use cluster analysis methods over attitude and value scales. Third, the perception of what is and is not greenwashing is itself subjective and controversial in the literature (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020); Therefore, it is advisable to supplement the quantitative view with qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, in follow-up research.

4.3 Conclusion

The paper presents an empirical picture of the trust of generations Y and Z in the environmental claims of fashion brands on the Czech market. Trust is low (68% tend to distrust), statistically dependent on knowledge and the perceived frequency of greenwashing, but not on age or frequency of slow fashion purchases. For sustainable fashion brands, this means that preventing a loss of trust is not about increasing the volume of sustainability messages, but about their quality — transparency, authenticity, traceability and visual caution.

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