Adolescent Generation Z and sustainable and responsible fashion consumption: exploring the value-action gap

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study was to explore whether a ''value-action gap'' exists between what members of the adolescent Generation Z (Gen Z) cohort value and how they act by investigating their actions related to sustainable and responsible fashion consumption (SRFC). Specific focus was placed on understanding these actions across the apparel consumption cycle, ranging from the acquisition, to use and disposal stages.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Forty-one members of Gen Z (20 males and 21 females) ranging in age from 15 to 18 participated in a total of seven focus groups.*

Findings – *Three emergent themes were identified and used to structure the interpretation: unintentionally sustainable, a knowledge conundrum and perceived barriers.*

Research limitations/implications – *The majority of focus group participants were Caucasian, and all were teenagers from a single geographical area in the Southeastern USA. Findings provided by this study offer insight regarding the SRFC habits of Gen Z relative to their concerns regarding sustainability and social and environmental responsibility.*

Practical implications – *Findings offer practitioners an opportunity to better understand how to address the needs of this generational cohort as they progress through adulthood.*

Originality/value – *Findings of this study investigate the value-action gap to offer insight into how adolescent members of Gen Z make consumption decisions, and specifically within a framework of the apparel consumption cycle as a whole, including acquisition, use and disposal. Findings also reveal some of their more general views on SRFC.*

Keywords *Value-action gap, Consumer behavior, Gen Z, Adolescen*, Apparel consumption, Socially responsible fashion consumption*

Paper type *Research paper*

According to recent studies, Generation Z (Gen Z) ranks climate change, income inequality and poverty to be top causes for concern (Broadbent *et al.*, 2017), and believes that businesses have a social and environmental responsibility to address such challenges (Porter Novelli and Cone, 2019). Despite these concerns, younger consumers, specifically those between the ages of 15 and 29 years, are the most frequent consumers of fast fashion items (Gupta and Gentry, 2018). Fast fashion is characterized by continuous product updates to reflect the latest trends (Gupta and Gentry, 2018) resulting in production methods that have been associated with the depletion of water resources and low employee wages (James and Montgomery, 2017). Moreover, the global apparel industry is estimated to be responsible for nearly 4% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, which is equivalent to the combined, annual carbon emissions of Germany, France and the UK (Berg *et al.*, 2020).

Given the relatively negative impact created by fast fashion, how do Gen Z consumers reconcile concern for the environment and interest in social responsibility with fashion

consumption? The literature on sustainable and responsible fashion consumption (SRFC) in general points to multiple barriers, including price (Eckhardt *et al.*, 2010), limited options (James and Montgomery, 2017), inconvenience (Francis and Davis, 2015), perceptions of its unfashionable nature and lack of quality (Connell, 2010) and uncomfortable materials (McNeill and Moore, 2015). Research specifically focused on young consumers and SRFC is limited but has also tended to focus on barriers (Francis and Davis, 2015).

Research on Gen Z specifically has examined the characteristics and consumption habits of this generation in general (Cheung *et al.*, 2017), as well as their concerns for sustainability and support for corporate social responsibility (First Insight, 2020). Yet there is little research that addresses the extent to which matters of sustainability enter into the apparel consumption decisions among adolescent members of the Gen Z cohort. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the difference, if any, between what members of this cohort value and what they do relative to these values. In environmental education, this difference is known as the "value-action gap" (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Specific focus is placed on understanding their actions across the apparel consumption cycle, ranging from acquisition, to use and disposal (Winakor, 1969) using Kollmuss and Agyeman's (2002) model of pro-environmental behavior as a lens for interpretation.

Adolescent Gen Zers, as opposed to Gen Zers more broadly, were chosen, as this demographic shops from a variety of retailers including both fast fashion and second-hand sources, spending upwards of 25% of their wallet share on apparel (Piper Sandler, 2018). Thus, given adolescents' spending on apparel, and their support of a variety of retailers, exploring this particular demographic's apparel consumption behavior relative to their values of social and environmental responsibility was of interest. This research was guided by the following questions:

> *Q1.* Why and how do Generation Z adolescents engage in SRFC?

> *Q2.* What are the barriers they experience in doing so?

Understanding this burgeoning generation's SRFC habits is important, as it is estimated that should the general population adopt more sustainable consumer behavior it could reduce the fashion industry's carbon emissions by 21% (Berg *et al.*, 2020). Thus, exploring how and to what extent adolescent Gen Z consumers engage in SRFC can offer insights regarding how the fashion industry can support sustainable consumption. Such an initiative can help the industry work towards the world's collective efforts to cap the increase in global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, which is the maximum increase in global temperature permissible before risking irreversible climate change (Berg *et al.*, 2020).

Findings provided by this study offer insight into the SRFC habits of Gen Z adolescents in the US relative to their concerns regarding sustainability and social and environmental responsibility. This study also offers practitioners an opportunity to better understand how to cater to consumers of this generational cohort as they progress through adulthood, in that, understanding their consumption decisions now could inform understanding of this cohort's future consumption patterns (John, 1999).

Literature review

Gen Z and consumption

Generation Z, or "Gen Z" is usually defined as those individuals born in the mid-1990s (Black *et al.*, 2017) and account for 40% of US consumers (Robinson, 2017). This generation currently commands upwards of \$143bn in direct purchasing power and influences up to \$333bn in household expenditures (Barkley, 2018). Based on global market research, this generational cohort spends more than half of their monthly incomes on products such as clothing, shoes and technology (Cheung *et al.*, 2017). Gen Z is

particularly attracted to innovative items that are both convenient and provide convenience in their lives, as well as to products that offer a means of escape from reality (Wood, 2013). Possibly due to the Great Recession, Gen Z consumers are purported to be cautious and pragmatic (Wood, 2013). Specifically, this cohort tends to save money and purchase quality products that last longer (Vision Critical, 2016). This is an interesting finding given that it contrasts with their frequent purchase of fast fashion products, which are often landfilled after a few uses due to poor quality of materials and construction (Gupta and Gentry, 2018). Moreover, Gen Z consumers prefer having access to products as opposed to ownership of them, resulting in a preference for sharing services (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). When it comes to brands, Gen Z consumers are not brand loyal, as it is more important to them to find brands that reflect their unique style (Bhargava *et al.*, 2020) and are in alignment with their values (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). As such, one study determined that young consumers in developing nations preferred such brands as Apple, Google and Samsung due to their sustainable brand images (Sharma and Joshi, 2019).

Gen Z is considered the first truly digital generation, as they have lived their entire lives with access to the internet (Cheung *et al.*, 2017). Having ubiquitous access to information via the internet, Gen Z is characterized by seeking truth and authenticity, which is reflected in their consumption choices (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Prevalence of the internet has also contributed to Gen Z's consumption habits, as omnichannel retail strategies allow Gen Z to shop on any device and/or multiple platforms (Bhargava *et al.*, 2020).

In terms of sustainability, the Gen Z cohort is typically characterized as a consumer group that believes companies and their products should be sustainable. According to one study (Porter Novelli and Cone, 2019), the majority of American Gen Zers are concerned about the health of the environment and social issues, and thus prefer to buy from a company that is addressing a social or environmental issue over one that is not. Gen Z's support of sustainable products is even spawning new industries such as alternative meats, as Gen Z is interested in consuming plant-based foods (Robinson, 2017). It is thought that Gen Z consumers are willing to spend more money to buy sustainable products or to buy from a sustainable company and will boycott those companies considered unsustainable (First Insight, 2020).

When it comes to apparel, prior research suggests Gen Z's purchase intention for recycled clothing is affected by various factors, including their willingness to pay, environmental concern, perceived value of recycled clothing and personal norms (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, although not related to apparel specifically, prior research has found that Gen Z consumers acquire products second-hand, either through resale or consignment markets or by purchasing upcycled products (First Insight, 2020). However, clothing swaps, rentals and subscription boxes are not as popular with Gen Z as they are with Millennial (i.e. those born between 1980 and 1994) consumers (First Insight, 2020) and the findings of at least two studies indicate that consumers of the Gen Z cohort do not frequently swap or borrow clothing with others (Fischer *et al.*, 2017; Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009).

Sustainable and responsible fashion consumption

There is not a single, agreed upon definition for sustainable fashion consumption that could be found in the current literature on the topic. However, Henninger *et al.* (2016) found that consumers and sustainable fashion experts believe sustainable apparel to reflect a host of characteristics, including ethical and/or sustainable designs, promotion of fair trade and/or wages and avoidance of harmful substances. Thus, in the context of this study, SRFC is defined as the acquisition, use and or disposal of fashion items that supports circular systems, minimizes negative and/or maximizes positive impacts on society and the natural environment (Kozlowski *et al.*, 2018).

Because there are many stages of apparel consumption, including "acquiring, storing, using, maintaining, and discarding clothing" (Winakor, 1969, p. 629), there are many ways a consumer can engage in SRFC. For instance, in the acquisition stage, one can engage in collaborative fashion consumption (CFC) or purchase fashion items second-hand (Iran and Schrader, 2017). In the use and maintenance stage, one could prolong the wear of a garment by modifying laundering approaches or by repairing it (Kozlowski *et al.*, 2018). Lastly, in the discard stage, one could donate used clothing to a charity or give or sell to a second-hand shop (Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009).

Despite the myriad of ways that consumers can participate in SRFC, according to the literature, there are many barriers preventing them from doing so, including price (Eckhardt *et al.*, 2010), with many consumers willing to trade ethics for cheaper prices (James and Montgomery, 2017). Additionally, studies have suggested that sustainable apparel is often perceived by consumers as being unfashionable and lacking in options, availability, quality and/or comfort (Connell, 2010; James and Montgomery, 2017; McNeill and Moore, 2015). Furthermore, at least one study revealed that shopping in second-hand stores is not enjoyable for consumers (McNeill and Moore, 2015), and another revealed that consumers think that second-hand stores typically display the clothing poorly, making it difficult to find things (Harris *et al.*, 2016).

Beyond the physical attributes of apparel, there are also barriers that pertain to consumer perspectives, including cynicism, in that some consumers believe their actions to support sustainable apparel will not create enough change to make a difference (James and Montgomery, 2017). Lack of knowledge concerning the environmental impact of apparel production, or of options for SRFC have also been found to be barriers in previous studies (Connell, 2010; Harris *et al.*, 2016; McNeill and Moore, 2015). In contrast, other studies have demonstrated that while many consumers are knowledgeable about the negative social and environmental implications of apparel production, such as the use of child labor, many either do not care or this information has no impact on their purchase decisions (Eckhardt *et al.*, 2010; Iwanow *et al.*, 2005).

Adolescents and sustainable consumption

While there is little research that addresses Gen Z and sustainable consumption specifically, there is literature that focuses on adolescents and sustainable apparel consumption more broadly. For instance, according to a study by Francis and Davis (2015), while adolescents are concerned about sustainability, they often do not consume sustainably in general due to many of the reasons listed above, including cost, convenience, lack of knowledge, apathy, peer pressure and doubts about how much personal responsibility they have for sustainability. Similarly, findings of prior studies indicate that apparel purchasing decisions among adolescents are motivated by low prices, fashionableness and fabric and functionality, as opposed to factors of sustainability (Fischer *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, young consumers have been found to be lacking in knowledge concerning how clothing is produced and how and where to dispose of it (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009), which limits their ability to engage in SRFC. Further, young consumers are doubtful that changes in their consumption and disposal habits will amount to measurable change and are not very interested in the "potential social, environmental or ethical impact" (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009, p. 196) of their consumption decisions. However, Morgan and Birtwistle (2009) did find that some young consumers believe if the environmental consequences of apparel production and disposal were more apparent, then retailers would have to change the types of clothing they offered and consumers might also modify their consumption and disposal habits.

For those young consumers that consume sustainably, previous studies indicate that such decisions are affected by a myriad of factors. For example, Nguyen *et al.* (2019) found that young consumers' attitudes toward green apparel (i.e. durable apparel produced ethically

and with reduced environmental impact) are affected by values of materialism, which along with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, affects their purchase intention of green apparel. Similarly, Su *et al.* (2019) determined that young consumers' apparel sustainability knowledge and personal values positively influence their attitudes towards sustainable clothing products (i.e. apparel produced in a manner that is both socially and environmentally responsibly), which, in turn, positively influences their willingness to buy such products.

Past research has also determined that adolescents do engage in some forms of SRFC, primarily in the use and disposal stages of apparel consumption. For instance, young consumers may keep clothing until it is no longer wearable (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009). While Morgan and Birtwistle (2009) found that many young consumers throw away cheaper clothing, they found that young consumers also donate used apparel to charity, give it to family and/or friends or re-use it in the home. The choice to donate used clothing was found to be motivated by the desire to wear something different (or only wanting to wear something a limited number of times), convenience or because it makes them feel good (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009).

Value-action gap

Early models regarding pro-environmental behavior hypothesize a positive, linear relationship between environmental knowledge and pro-environmental actions (Burgess *et al.*, 1998). However, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) question this idea, arguing that more environmental knowledge does not contribute to increased pro-environmental behavior. To explain the factors that contribute to and impede pro-environmental behavior, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) developed a model consisting of internal and external factors and barriers (Figure 1). The model is not meant to include all factors that affect pro-environmental behavior, but rather those that are reported to be the most meaningful (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). For instance, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) list internal factors such as an environmental consciousness, which includes a consumer's knowledge, feelings, fear, emotional involvement, values and attitudes. These internal factors interact with external factors, such as infrastructure, political, social and cultural factors, and economic situations

| **Figure 1** | Model of pro-environmental behavior |

Note: Reprinted from Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002, p. 257)
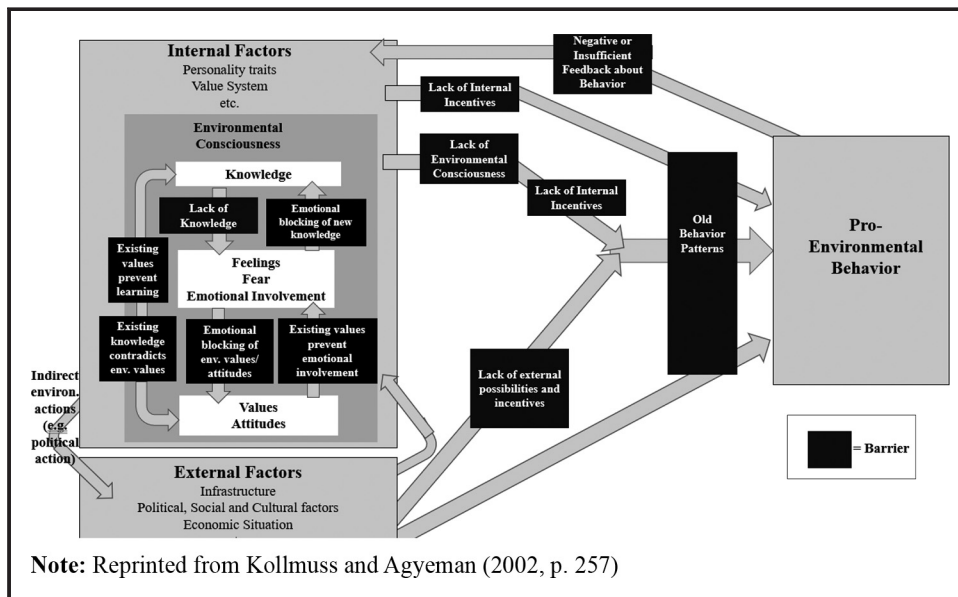
to affect a consumer's engagement in pro-environmental behavior (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). However, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) also list barriers that prevent consumers from aligning their pro-environmental consciousness with their actions. These barriers include a lack of knowledge, emotional blocking of new knowledge, lack of internal incentives, lack of environmental consciousness, negative or insufficient feedback about behavior, lack of external possibilities and incentives and old behavior patterns (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) note that the largest positive influence on pro-environmental behavior occurs when both internal and external factors act together, while the largest inhibitor of pro-environmental behavior is old behavior patterns, indicated by the larger arrows and graphically larger barrier, respectively.

Model of pro-environmental behavior

Method

While the characteristics of Gen Z and types and barriers of SRFC discussed above are known, there is little research that addresses how the values of Gen Z affect adolescent apparel consumption decisions. Further, what is not known is whether, and to what extent, adolescent Gen Zers engage in SRFC during the various stages of the apparel consumption cycle (Winakor, 1969), and what specific barriers Gen Z teenagers experience when trying to engage in SRFC. Because more information is needed to better understand Gen Z's apparel consumption habits relative to their values, an interpretive approach was adopted to address this study's research objectives. Such an approach is appropriate when the research is exploratory, and/or more information is needed to understand a phenomenon (Hodges, 2011).

Talking with members of a cohort can help to better understand how they perceive and experience a consumption phenomenon in everyday life (Taylor *et al.*, 2015) and therefore interviews were determined to be an effective means of addressing the purpose of this study. Specifically, focus group interviews, as opposed to in-depth interviews, were used because this approach to data collection highlights natural social interaction, allowing for participants to feel comfortable discussing their thoughts with their peers (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). The nature of a focus group allows for multiple viewpoints to be shared and expressed through dialogue, as well as interaction to occur between participants, resulting in a deeper understanding of the topic to emerge (Taylor *et al.*, 2015).

Data collection

Given that the purpose of this study was to understand adolescent Gen Zers' apparel consumption habits relative to their values, purposive sampling (Taylor *et al.*, 2015) was used to collect primary qualitative data from a diverse sample of adolescents attending a high school in the Southeastern region of the USA where the researchers had established contacts within the school. With IRB approval from the researchers' university and approval from school administrators, the researchers contacted teachers at the high school. Two teachers allowed the researchers to visit their classrooms to recruit participants. There were no incentives provided to participants other than the opportunity for them to share their experiences with apparel consumption. A total of 41 members of Gen Z (20 males and 21 females) ranging in age from 15 to 18 and representing Asian, Hispanic, African-American, and Caucasian races participated in the focus groups (see Table 1). Participants under the age of 18 received signed parental permission to participate in the focus groups. A total of seven focus groups were conducted ranging in size from three to eight participants. Simultaneous analysis and interpretation occurred throughout the data collection process to identify recuring themes, which directed subsequent questioning (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). Participants were recruited until saturation was reached (Taylor *et al.*, 2015), that is, once

Table 1 Participant characteristics		
Characteristic	n^a	% of n
Gender		
Female	21	0.51
Male	20	0.49
Race		
African American	3	0.073
Asian	1	0.024
Biracial (Asian and white)	1	0.024
Hispanic	5	0.122
White	31	0.756
Age		
15	4	0.10
16	14	0.34
17	5	0.12
18	18	0.44
Note: $^a n = 41$		

the same information began to emerge in the data, and no new information was learned, the total number of focus groups conducted and data collected were considered sufficient for understanding the phenomenon (Hodges, 2011). Focus groups were conducted in person and during the school day, in a public space on a high school campus. The average focus group duration was 34 min. Focus groups were constrained to a maximum of 55 min because this is the amount of time allotted to one class period.

Participant characteristics

Focus group questions focused on participants' apparel consumption decisions, knowledge and awareness of issues raised about sustainability, and to what extent these matters played a role in their consumption acts throughout the consumption cycle. For instance, participants were asked the following broad question to encourage discussion:

Q3. How do you dispose of unworn or unwanted clothing?

Questions then progressed to address the aim of this study and included such questions as:

Q4. Do you care if the production of clothing is sustainable? (See the Appendix for all questions).

When necessary, responses were followed by probing to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the participants' responses (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). All focus groups were moderated by the lead author and the audio recording of each focus group was transcribed verbatim. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms are used in place of real names.

Data analysis

Data analysis began while collecting data as the authors identified recurring themes (Taylor *et al.*, 2015) while conducting the focus groups. After data collection was complete, and the focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim, an iterative, systematic process to further analyze the data using Kollmuss and Agyeman's (2002) value-action gap as a lens for interpretation was used by both authors to conceptualize consistent meanings present across the data. First, transcriptions of each focus group were read. After reading all

transcripts, data were then coded and categorized to describe the emerging themes that repeatedly surfaced across focus groups (Spiggle, 1994). After initial categories were established, transcripts were re-read in tandem by the authors to further compare, dimensionalize, abstract and define the categories (Spiggle, 1994). This process of analysis and interpretation allowed for a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of how and to what extent, as members of Gen Z, participants engage in SRFC. To ensure reliability, member checks were conducted wherein the interpretation of the data were shared with participants to obtain their feedback (Hodges, 2011).

Findings

As a result of the focus group data analysis, three emergent themes were identified and used to structure the interpretation:

1.   unintentionally sustainable;

2.   a knowledge conundrum; and

3.   perceived barriers.

Each is discussed relative to SRFC and the apparel consumption cycle in the following sections. Each participant's pseudonym is presented along with identifiers of gender, age and focus group number.

Unintentionally sustainable

Although participants professed to be concerned about the environment and social equality, this value did not seem to always translate directly to their apparel consumption decisions. That is, aside from not wanting to be wasteful, sustainability was not cited as a primary factor that affected their acquisition decisions. For example, as Kay (Female, 18, #3) states, "[I] would like to say it matters, but, like, when I'm buying clothes I definitely don't really, like, think about that."

Interestingly, participants revealed that they do engage in SRFC sometimes, albeit unintentionally. For instance, when acquiring clothing, many participants engage in SRFC by shopping at second-hand stores because these stores are "really cheap and you can find interesting things there that nobody has" (Kay, Female, 18, #3). For some, shopping at second-hand stores is an experience in and of itself, as Austin (Male, 18, #2) explains:

> You can also find, like, some new, like, some new brands that you didn't really know about or you didn't really keep your eye on […] so, really just, [it] seems to be like an adventure every time I go there.

For Austin (Male, 18, #2) and other participants, second-hand stores also afford shoppers the opportunity to be unique because "the clothes there are kind of cool and like you can't find them everywhere else, so there's less possibility that you're going to look like everyone else at school" (Buck, Male, 16, #2).

Despite many participants expressing broad support for second-hand clothing acquisition throughout the focus groups, a couple of participants openly disagreed with their peers. These participants shared that second-hand clothing was not something they would consider because "it makes [them] kind of like uncomfortable to like think about wearing someone else's clothes" (Gabriella, Female, 18, #4). Some male participants expressed with one another that they did not frequently shop in thrift stores because they:

> Shop mostly like for convenience and stuff like that and […] a lot of thrift stores, it's like you have to put a lot of effort in to find the thing that you want (Benser, Male, 18, #7).

Others engage in SRFC by borrowing clothing from friends. For some, borrowing clothing was unintentional, such as needing an item of clothing while at a sleepover or at a friend's house. However, others do so intentionally. For example, Taylor (Female, 18, #2) stated that:

> I tend to do that a lot. Like, I've got a bunch of my friend's clothes right now that at some point I'll give back to her, and she's got some of mine.

Some of the female participants also talked about engaging in SRFC by swapping or selling their clothing via Instagram closet accounts. Kay (Female, 18, #3) explained this process in some detail:

> If I have clothes that [...] I want to give away but [...] you can make money off of it [...] I just put [...] them on Instagram, and people can, like, comment, and like then I bring them to school and like people can try them on or whatever and then Venmo me for it [...] and if you, like, see something on another clothes account that you like, and that same person likes something of yours, you can just swap it sometimes [...] so it's like a big high school clothes swap.

In this way, Julia (Female, 15, #5) even thinks that due to the prevalence of Instagram closet accounts, "reselling or buying clothes for a second time [...] [has become] more socially acceptable." Moreover, Instagram closet accounts may help users become more comfortable with purchasing apparel second-hand, as the items and their sellers are familiar to them, thereby allowing participants to trust that they know where the clothing has been. Interestingly, while male participants did not swap or sell clothing via Instagram clothing accounts, many did "sell shoes like basketball shoes or just like regular sneakers" (Trevor, Male, 17, #5) on Snapchat or Instagram. Male participants discussed with each other why it is that they do not engage in clothing acquisition via Instagram like their female peers. Ultimately, they determined together that it is because males are not supposed to be interested in fashion, and relatedly, that they do not have an excess of apparel items to dispose of.

For the use stage of apparel consumption, participants discussed wearing their clothing for as long as possible, such as Taylor (Female, 18, #2) who keeps clothing for "three to four years depending on if they still fit." Many participants only stopped wearing clothing if it "gets messed up, or it gets too small" (Lekobe, Male, 18, #4).

In terms of the disposal stage, participants were hesitant to simply throw away clothing, and instead preferred to donate it to family and friends, thrift shops, or charity organizations to avoid being wasteful. As explained by LJ (Male, 16, #3), "there's no point in wasting it, and it's clothes we aren't gonna wear, so nobody's gonna buy it, might as well give it to somebody who could use it." Through group discussion, participants hypothesized together that such behavior is rooted in family habits, as this is just what their family always did. Moreover, access to convenient donation sites facilitated such behavior. Several participants repurpose used clothing. For example, Lekobe (Male, 18, #4) said that when his sweatshirts become too small, he will "just cut the sleeves off and, like, work out in or something like that."

According to Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), pro-environmental behavior results from both internal and external factors. Indeed, data from the focus groups suggest that participants do engage in SRFC acts across the apparel consumption cycle because of such internal factors as motivations, and external factors including infrastructure, price and social and cultural factors. SRFC is prevalent in the acquisition stage, in as much as participants prefer to consume secondhand clothing and/or borrow clothing from friends because they perceive such clothing to be unique (i.e. motivations) and affordable (i.e. price). Moreover, due to the prevalence of Instagram clothing accounts, some participants perceive there to be positive social and cultural external factors that encourage second-hand consumption. SRFC is also evident in the use and disposal stages, as participants note prolonging the use of their clothing and donating and/or upcycling their clothing instead of throwing it

away. Participants note that waste avoidance and resourcefulness (i.e. motivations) as well as the convenient access to donation facilities (i.e. infrastructure) encourages such behavior.

A knowledge conundrum

Many participants possessed knowledge regarding the unsustainable nature of apparel, in that they talked about learning "at some point, from some course that, like, there's child labor, that like often goes into a t-shirt that's being made, which is how the price is so low" (Trevor, Male, 17, #5). Yet this knowledge does not generally affect their consumption, as "no one, like, goes out of their way to try and change the way it is" (Lekobe, Male, 18, #4). At this point in many of the focus groups, participants expressed guilt for not taking into consideration such issues when consuming apparel. However, they responded by supporting one another in their decisions, and expressed concern that they lack awareness of the extent of the problem. As Jamie (Female, 16, #2) explained:

> I obviously don't, like, support child labor and things like that, but a lot of companies aren't like 'we use child labor and have unfair working conditions'[…] I don't go into enough research to know about, to learn about each country that it's being made in, and then the conditions of where, like, certain brands [are made] […] but I obviously, like, don't support those things.

It is interesting to note that this is where the knowledge conundrum emerged, as many participants expressed that, should unsustainable or harmful production practices be made more transparent, then they would not consider purchasing apparel produced by such means. As Juan (Male, 16, #6) stated:

> If I knew, um, like, some store was, like, not environmentally friendly or just treat[ed] the workers bad or was, like, um something along the lines of that, I would generally not buy from there.

Throughout the focus groups, participants discussed with one another the issues of sustainability they cared most about. For many, it was social responsibility, with many sharing that they care about how others are treated, especially children, because there is more of an "emotional connection to child labor versus [the] environment" (Bevin, Male, 18, #7). Benser (Male, 18, #7) agreed, adding "I definitely care more […] about people than environmentalism consequences […] I think humans have much more of a capacity to suffer than environmental aspects such as like trees and stuff." However, others were quick to note that humans would "suffer in the future from environmental damage" (Perez, Male, 18, #7), and thus environmental sustainability was also of importance. Other participants noted that it is often the terminology used when describing something as being sustainable that makes it difficult to really understand the underlying issues. Jack (Male, 16, #1) argued that choice of words matters,

> *Unsafe* and like *unsafe working conditions* is like really different from saying 'it's not sustainable' or, like, there's some things that can be done more ethically, I think it's just like a whole 'nother level of, they could be, like, killing people and is, is it really worth supporting for that shirt [you get] for like 10 bucks cheaper?

While Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) suggest that a lack of environmental knowledge may be a barrier to pro-environmental behavior, participants seemed to have knowledge concerning the unsustainable nature of apparel production. However, this knowledge is not immediately retrieved when purchasing apparel, and thus, it does not directly impact their apparel consumption habits. Nevertheless, participants claim that, should they have access to more information, it would lead to more sustainable behavior. Specifically, participants note that their acquisition of unsustainably produced apparel would cease should unsustainable production practices be made more obvious at the retail level.

Perceived barriers

Participants expressed interest in engaging in SRFC but talked about facing barriers to doing so. In many of the focus groups, participants bonded over the barrier of price. Anna (Female, 18, #2) explained that there are:

> Good brands that are, like, very ethical, like Reformation, but then a dress is like $200, and I understand that, like, it's better to support companies that are always ethical, but, like, I'm just really broke right now.

Kiara (Female, 18, #4) agreed, and stated that:

> H&M has like $5 shirts[. . .]and that's kind of like what I'm going for[. . .]I know that H&M now has like a sustainable branch, but it's still two times or three times more expensive than the other clothes, so it's just kind of easier to go for the usual.

Throughout the focus groups, participants expressed cynicism regarding the impact that avoiding unsustainably produced apparel will have, in as much as the items have already been produced and therefore the damage has already been done. Moreover, some participants were doubtful of the impact that one person could really have. As Buck (Male, 16, #2) elaborates "I'm just one person, if I do it, what's really gonna change?"

Other participants do not engage in SRFC because it is not convenient to do so as "the bigger brands are just more accessible" (Kiara, Female, 18, #4) or "it's easier to get to [. . .] places that are like Target for example" (Ben, Male, 17, #4). This is because participants, like many adolescents, must rely on others for transportation. In addition, the larger retailers have more options to choose from, as Ellie (Female, 18, #1) explained:

> Forever 21, Aeropostale, American Eagle, like all, all of those teenager clothing stores they, I'm guessing like if I went and Googled them after this focus group, like, I would probably find out some pretty bad stuff and things that I don't really, I mean, I do have a choice, but it's, it's an easier choice to still shop there.

Thus, while many participants expressed an interest in engaging in SRFC, they face a myriad of perceived barriers to doing so. Such barriers as price, cynicism, accessibility and habits are indicative of Kollmuss and Agyeman's (2002) barriers of economic restrictions, negative or insufficient feedback about behavior, lack of external possibilities and established behavior patterns.

Discussion

In this study, the value-action gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002) or the gap between SRFC and the values held among members of an increasingly important consumer cohort, Gen Z, was examined. Two research questions guided this study:

> *RQ1.* Why and how do Generation Z adolescents engage in SRFC?

> *RQ2.* What are the barriers they experience in doing so?

Findings of this study confirm the existence of a value-action gap among adolescent Gen Z consumers, as their knowledge and values of sustainability do not always directly contribute to SRFC. Findings also offer insight into how adolescent members of Gen Z make consumption decisions, and specifically within a framework of the apparel consumption cycle as a whole, including acquisition, use and disposal (Winakor, 1969). Lastly, this study offers more general views on SRFC as well as barriers participants face to participating in SRFC.

The Gen Z value-action gap

As demonstrated in Figure 2, participants do engage in SRFC during the acquisition, use and disposal stages of apparel consumption. Focus group data suggests that such

Figure 2 Gen Z value-action G
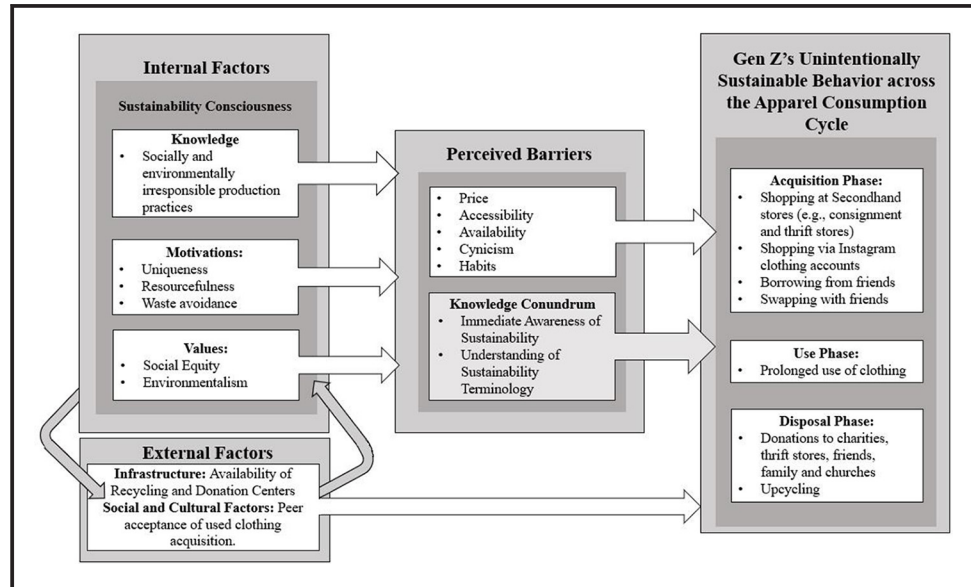
behavior is affected by internal factors similar to those reported by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), including a sustainability consciousness, which is characterized by knowledge, motivations, and values. Specifically, unlike findings of previous studies (Connell, 2010; Harris *et al.*, 2016; McNeill and Moore, 2015; Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009), participants indicate they have knowledge of socially and environmentally irresponsible apparel production practices. Internal factors also consist of participants' motivations, or what influences their SRFC behaviors. Focus group data indicates that participants' SRFC behavior is motivated by uniqueness, resourcefulness and waste avoidance. These motivations lead them to acquire used clothing, either via secondhand clothing stores (e.g. thrift and/or consignment stores) or via peers (e.g. Instagram closet accounts and/or swapping and/or borrowing from friends), prolong the use of their clothing until it is no longer functional, upcycle their clothing and/or donate their clothing. While findings regarding the use and disposal habits of participants support Morgan and Birtwistle (2009), findings regarding participants acquisition habits contradict those studies that have determined that swapping or borrowing clothing from others is not a preferred mode of clothing acquisition among young consumers (First Insight, 2020; Fischer *et al.*, 2017; Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009), and that shopping second-hand is not enjoyed by young consumers (McNeill and Moore, 2015).

The Gen Z value-action gap

Based on the data, Figure 2 demonstrates that SRFC behavior is also positively affected by values, including social equity and environmentalism, as participants report caring about the welfare of others and the environment, and would take into consideration such information during apparel consumption if it were readily available. Interestingly, despite prior research that suggests Gen Z consumers possess values of sustainability (Broadbent *et al.*, 2017; Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Cone Communications, 2017), findings from this study indicate that such values are not at the forefront during apparel consumption decision-making, supporting Kollmuss and Agyeman's (2002) value-action gap theory. Thus, participants' behavior can be considered unintentionally sustainable, as participants do not consider sustainability as a primary motivation for their behavior. Lastly, focus group data

suggests participants' SRFC behavior is positively influenced by such external factors as an infrastructure of conveniently located donation and recycling centers. Social and cultural factors, including the social acceptance of used clothing acquisition due to the prevalence of Instagram clothing accounts, also positively affect participants' SRFC behavior.

Despite the internal and external factors that positively contribute to SRFC, the focus group data indicate that participants face a host of barriers that prevent such behavior, thereby contributing to the value-action gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). While some barriers are commonly noted by previous studies, including price, accessibility, availability, cynicism (Connell, 2010; Francis and Davis, 2015; James and Montgomery, 2017; McNeill and Moore, 2015) and habits (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002), as reflected in Figure 2, findings of the present study indicate that participants also lack an immediate awareness of the sustainability of an apparel item. That is, while participants note possessing background knowledge concerning the unethical and environmentally damaging effects of apparel production, this knowledge is not retrieved at the time of apparel acquisition. This finding somewhat contrasts with prior studies (Su et al., 2019) that have found that increased knowledge positively affects the consumption of apparel with a social or environmental benefit. Additionally, participants found it hard to participate in SRFC due to confusing and irrelevant sustainability terminology. Nevertheless, similar to Morgan and Birtwistle (2009), a knowledge conundrum emerged throughout the focus groups, in as much as many participants maintained that should this information be made available and more clear at the time of purchase, their intentions to engage in SRFC could be positively influenced.

Implications for theory and practice

This study applies Kollmuss and Agyeman's (2002) model to demonstrate how, in the context of fashion consumption, decisions of Gen Z consumers may be affected by internal and external factors, as well as the barriers participants experience when trying to engage in SRFC. It is noted that findings from qualitative studies should not necessarily be generalized to the broader population; however, it is possible to apply such findings to expand upon existing theoretical frameworks (Hodges, 2011). As such, while Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) note that their model does not include all variables that affect pro-environmental behavior, the model presented here extends Kollmuss and Agyeman's (2002) findings by including some specific and relevant barriers faced by some members of the Gen Z cohort, including immediate awareness of apparel sustainability and confusing sustainability terminology.

Managerially, this study highlights how practitioners can narrow the value-action gap to support sustainability more broadly across the fashion industry. Specifically, by providing Gen Z with relevant, easy to understand sustainability information at the time of purchase, brands can facilitate SRFC, as participants indicate that such information can affect their apparel consumption decisions. Furthermore, this study suggests that Gen Z's consumption of secondhand apparel is linked with their motivations of uniqueness, resourcefulness and waste avoidance. Thus, practitioners who want to influence SRFC can do so by appealing to such motivations.

Limitations and suggestions for further study

Although findings of this study shed light on what some adolescent members of Gen Z think about sustainability and how it enters their apparel consumption decisions, there are limitations. Namely, most focus group participants were Caucasian, and all were from a single geographical area in the Southeastern USA. Moreover, this study focused solely on adolescent Gen Z-ers and does not include members of Gen Z over the age of 18 years. Therefore, generalizability of findings is limited. Thus, future studies should sample older members of Gen Z to determine whether the cohort as a whole possesses similar apparel

consumption habits as adolescent Gen Zers. Additionally, due to the nature of the focus group method, participants may have felt the need to conform to the expectations of their peers; therefore, their responses may reflect the norms of the group.

Although participants were aware of the need to be responsible when using and disposing of clothing, in terms of SRFC, acquisition seemed to pose the biggest challenge, largely due to a lack of information and transparency on the part of apparel producers and retailers. Given the exploratory nature of this study, future research is needed to better understand the types of communication required for members of Gen Z to be more aware of the implications of their fast fashion consumption and, in turn, to more fully engage in acts of apparel acquisition that are sustainable in nature.

Findings of this study revealed that the inclusion of information about whether a garment was made sustainably would affect how participants act with respect to their acquisition of apparel. More research is needed to encourage acts of SRFC by this cohort throughout all stages of the apparel consumption cycle. In particular, the popularity of Instagram closet accounts that emerged among participants in this study warrants future exploration, as this platform has encouraged not only disposal-related SRFC actions but seems to have made it more socially acceptable to engage in SRFC during the acquisition stage as well. By exploring the use of Instagram closet accounts as a way to act on their values related to sustainability, SRFC could be encouraged not just among members of Gen Z, but among all apparel consumers.

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Appendix. Focus group interview questions

1. How do you dispose of unworn or unwanted clothing?
2. Are there clothes in your closet or wardrobe that have been bought but you have never worn, and if so, can you explain why you have not worn them?
3. On average, how often do you wear a piece of clothing before you stop wearing it? Why do you stop wearing it?
4. Do you shop at second-hand stores for clothing?
5. Do you shop at second-hand stores for clothing?
6. Is it important to you to know how your clothing is made? Why or why not?
7. Do you care if the production of clothing is sustainable?
8. If you were to learn that a company was producing clothing that harmed the environment, underpaid its workers, that its workers work in unsafe conditions or used child labor, would that change your decision to purchase that clothing? Why or why not?

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