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Emotional Fashion: an Exercise in Understanding what Values Drive Youth Generations' Consumer Behaviors

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Abstract: With social media and online shopping, brands have more opportunities than ever to emotionally connect and educate their customers. Brands are able to be more transparent about their sustainable mission and the lifecycle of their garments through these platforms. In turn, this provides customers transparent access to companies with shared values. As the Gen Z market continues to grow, the garment industry needs to address the disconnect between the sustainable values of Millennials, the deepening values of Gen Z, and that of their brands' sustainable message. This paper presents an exercise in understanding why emotional connections to our clothing are created. The objective of this exploration was twofold: to understand how empathetic ties are formed, which could aid in designing more emotionally connective sustainable fashion, and raise awareness in the participants regarding their consumer behavior and its environmental impact. This paper presents a three-part study of Millennials and Gen Z. A balance of quantitative and qualitative questions provided for comparative analysis and individual expression. By understanding their philosophical relationship with clothing, business models can be designed to promote meaningful and empathetic ties between people and their clothing. As a secondary objective, these questions encouraged behavioral self-reflection but shows the potential of utilizing this study format as a creative tool.

Introduction

The Slow Fashion movement speaks of linking pleasure with an awareness of environmental sustainability through educating consumers on product life cycles (Fletcher, 2008/2014). These ideas resonate with the values of the youth generations, Millennials (b.1982-1995) and Gen Z (b. after 1995). In a 2014 survey, 78% of Millennials in 17 different countries said they would recommend a company they believe is a good citizen and 71% would be loyal to that business (MLSGroup, 2014). A survey by Sparks and Honey (2014) shows 76% of Gen Z are concerned about humanity's impact on the planet. However, within the American fashion industry, businesses primarily rely on encouraging fast consumption. From a garment's concept, design, production, marketing, and its waste cycle, American fashion brands struggle to connect with younger generations' values, identifiers, and their drive for environmental responsibility.

With social media and online shopping, brands have more opportunities than ever to emotionally connect and educate their customers. Technology enables brands to be more transparent about their sustainable mission and the lifecycle of their garments providing consumers access to companies with shared values. Between 2016 and 2017, brands increased spending on social media by 60%, and by 2020, it is expected that companies will focus 50% of their marketing on online campaigns (Alemany, 2019). However, information overload is a norm in today's fast paced digital world, especially for digital native youth generations. As Fletcher and Grose state, "The fast-paced and visually noisy marketplace depletes the psychic attention of the shopper; elements that might signal emotional attachment to a garment, as quiet as they often are, can easily be drowned out by the competition for a shopper's attention" (2012). The daily barrage of information coming from the fast fashion industry causes consumers to struggle with making choices that align with their values: grasping the environmental impact of

their consumer habits and making mindful purchases to reduce their impact. As these generations' buying power continues to grow, the garment industry needs to address the disconnect between the sustainable values of Millennials, the deepening values of Gen Z, and that of their brand's sustainable message.

While research shows that people forge emotional connections with their garments (Fletcher and Grose 2012), this paper presents a study in understanding why those emotional connections are created amongst youth generations. The study's exercises take a deeper look into the emotional mindset of these generations, asking "what parts within the current fashion system inhibit Gen Z and Millennials to emotionally connect to fashion sustainability throughout the entire clothing cycle?" The objective of this exploration is twofold: to understand how empathetic ties are formed in order to design more emotionally connective and sustainable fashion models; and to raise awareness in the participants regarding their consumer behavior and its environmental impact. By understanding consumer's philosophical relationship with clothing, business models can be designed to promote meaningful and empathetic ties between people and their clothing.

Methods

This research study was comprised of three different self-reporting exercises (survey, daily log, and daily journal) regarding participants' daily fashion. The kind of clothing recorded included tops, bottoms, outerwear, hats, and shoes. Accessories and intimates were not measured during this study. Millennial and Gen Z participants were recruited for exercise one and two through Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. Participants anonymously completed all sections. Each exercise uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions to record a comprehensive experience for each wearer. While the data is shallow on its own, giving individuals the time and space to have their thought process creates more nuance and depth within the numbers.

Exercise One

Participants answered 16 questions that guided them through the entire process of *finding*, *buying*, and *disposing* of clothing. Within these three sections, participants recorded their habits and preferences through decision

matrices, multiple choice questions, and short answer questions to capture rationale. This balance of quantitative and qualitative responses provided for comparative analysis and individual expression. As a secondary objective, these questions encouraged behavioral self-reflection.

Exercise Two

Participants submitted a picture of the outfit they wore for a single day and answered four supporting questions:

1. Describe the articles of clothing?
2. Where did you purchase each piece?
3. How much did each one cost?
4. How long have you owned each article?

The objective was to assess participants' current consumer behaviors. By collecting one day's worth of data from multiple sources, a small population sample average was determined for each question.

Exercise Three

This exercise followed one slow fashion aware student for 30 days. This participant recorded the four questions above for each day. The objective of this study was to compare the differences in clothing choices from one slow fashion aware person to the sample from exercise two.

Results

Introduction

A difference in behaviors, preferences, and impact is illustrated by comparing the average numbers from each sample set. Exercise One focuses on the youth's cumulative habits and perceptions throughout a garment's life cycle, collecting 162 responses. Exercise Two analyzes the average preferences of multiple participants on the same day. Exercise Three closely evaluates one individual's wardrobe choices and patterns over 30 days.

Exercise One: Survey – Part One

This series of questions addressed the *finding* process. Question one asked how important personal style was on a scale from most important (1) to least important (6). Over 64% of participants marked 2 or 1 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. How Important is Style? © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

When asked why they believe style to be important or not, over 85% of individuals found it as a meaningful form of self-expression - this includes comfort, self-identifying, personal expression, nonverbal identifier, and creative medium (Figure 2). A common response was that fashionable comfort lead to wearers exuding self confidence in the phrase, “look good, feel good.”



Figure 2. Why is Style Important? © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

The second series of questions gathered information regarding personal taste, trends, and brand alignment. Question one inquired about the average price participants paid for their clothing: 30% paid between \$21- \$40 and 22% paid \$41- \$60 for their clothing (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Average Price Range for Clothing. © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

A decision matrix than had participants report which of eight resources they most frequented for fashion information, 1 being the most and 8 the least (Figure 4). Reinforcing brands' use of social media for connecting to youth generation, 36% reported finding trends through social media. One quarter of participants reported in-store as their primary means. Through their short answers, 39% of participants responded that they valued accessibility to choices and 22% reported they desired seeing what was available. Many individuals enjoyed being able to do comparative market research for style, price, and quality before buying an item.



Figure 4. Finding Trends. © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

Exercise One: Survey – Part Two

The second section, *buying*, walked participants through four main aspects of their consumer experiences. The first question asked how frequently they bought clothing. 40% of participants buy clothing less than once a month while only 26% reported making purchases a few times a month (Figure 5).



Figure 5. How Often Do You Buy Clothes?
© Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

A decision matrix presenting eight options surveyed where participants bought their clothes, 1 being the most and 8 being the least. 40% of participants prefer online shopping. However, 21% recorded thrift stores as their primary place to buy clothing (Figure 6). The follow up question asked participants to explain their top choices. 30% reported that their preferences were convenience, echoing the preferences reported in *finding*. 18% reported that variety and browsing was important.



Figure 6. Buying Trends. © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

Exercise One: Survey – Part Three

Part 3, *disposing*, asked participants to consider their fashion waste. The first question asked participants how often they disposed of their clothing. 27% reported 2-4 times a year (seasonally) and 26% annually (Figure 8).



Figure 8. How Often do You Get Rid of Clothes?
© Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

Participants then indicated how many articles are being discarded at a time. 38% discarded 5-8 articles of clothing from their wardrobe and 20% averaged 9-12 articles (Figure 9).



Figure 9. How Many Articles of Clothing are Disposed of at a time? © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

The third question sought rationale for why individuals discarded clothing. 33% reported clothing as damaged and/or old. A quarter reported "doesn't fit" as the cause (Figure 10).



Figure 10. What is Your Main Reason for Disposing of Clothing? © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

To understand disposal locations, a decision matrix with eight options was presented. A large majority donate their clothing, 63% to charity and 22% to family members (Figure 11). Providing rationale, 40% said they desired reuse while 20% said it was easy.



Figure 11. Disposing Trends. © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

Exercise Two: Outfit Log

The second exercise recorded 35 participants' outfits for one day. Out of 139 articles of clothing reported - including tops, bottoms, outerwear, and shoes - the average price spent on each piece was about \$35.34. The following is a breakdown of the averages:

- Boots - \$60.56
- Jeans - \$35.89
- Tennis shoes - \$82
- T-shirts - \$10.44

Regarding garment lifecycle, the 139 articles averaged 1.73 years (Figure 12).

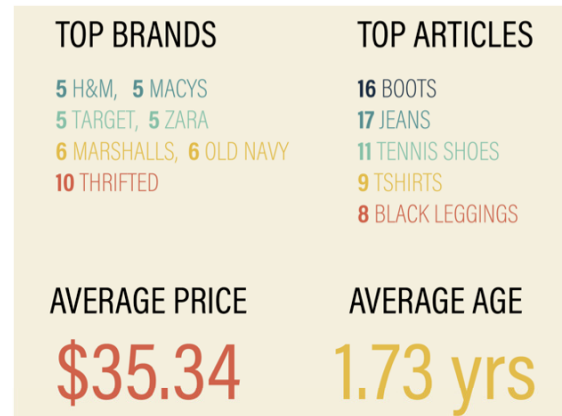


Figure 12. What is Your Main Reason for Disposing of Clothing? © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

Exercise Three: Daily Journal

One Millennial slow fashion conscious participant documented what they wore each day for 30 consecutive days. The following illustration (Figure 13) visualizes all 30 outfits.

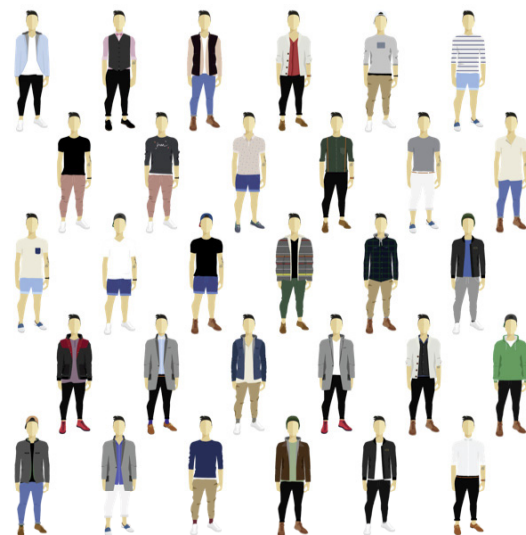


Figure 13. Daily Journal - 30 Days of Outfits. © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

In total, 66 different articles were worn throughout the month. The participant reported 70 garments in their wardrobe that were unused: garment utilization was only 48.5%. Of the pieces worn, 24% were from second hand / thrift stores and 20% were gifted or handed down (Figure 14). The average price across the 66 garments was \$11.2 per article (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Top Brands and Average Price.
© Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

More nuanced data can be analyzed from this study. For example, they reported that 47% of clothing was worn only once. Figure 15 illustrates the articles that were worn the most/least, highest/lowest priced, and newest/oldest pieces.



Figure 15. Most/Least of Clothes. © Tiffany Lau and The Ohio State University.

Conclusions

Based on the research collected from this study, there were three clear takeaways. These three strategies can be leveraged by the fashion industry to strengthen emotional connections between garments and people.

Self-Expressive Fashion = Product Longevity

Using style as a medium for self-expression and value communication is nothing new. Slow fashion research shows that fashion is a communication tool: the more it represents an individual's authentic expression, the stronger the relationship. The stronger the emotional tie, the longer one keeps and cares for that item. The outcomes from this research supports this

concept of self-expression equates to product longevity. This form of non-verbal communication was described poignantly as not only a reassurance of self-confidence and utilitarian comfort but also self-affirmation of their own identity to themselves and others. Shoppers, both on-line and in-store, can establish an emotional connection before an article of clothing is even purchased. Providing opportunities for customization or alteration of new or used garments both in-store and on-line would tap into this generation's desire to express their identity and own a garment longer.

Cut Through the Digital Noise

Millennial and Gen Z shoppers are fiercely loyal to brands they believe they can trust and have similar values to their own. However, the visual noise of digital channels causes difficulty navigating which brands are authentic and trustworthy. This study showed that youth generation consumers prefer browsing and buying clothes through digital channels that are easy to see and compare options. Technology gives consumers the power to research and confirm the reliability of their investment. Brands can strategically use social media and digital touchpoints inside stores as a sustainability storyteller, being more transparent with their sustainable methods while inspiring and educating customers to live their values. Creating digital tools that are easy, accessible, and truthful is a way to attract youth generations to invest and forge a relationship with sustainable businesses.

Design Circular Economy Experiences

The participants in this study made it clear that they donate or give away their unwanted clothes. The data from the 35 participants along with the daily journal exercise illustrates the gap between Millennial and Gen Z intentions and actions. Driven by a social responsibility, people desire their personal garments to have a life beyond their ownership; however, they want the process to be easy and rewarding, expressing that they have not yet been given the correct and convenient tools to do so. Brands such as Madewell and H&M have implemented drop boxes in their stores to incentivize customers to recycle clothing. The reclaimed clothing can be reused or upcycled into a different product and the customers are given an instore discount. This concept can be more readily implemented to further attract and

encourage customers to be mindful of their habits. Throughout the clothing shopping experience, both online and in person, brands should design moments to inspire emotional responsibility.

This study illustrated that younger generations want to buy from second hand stores. However, current thrift store are not designed in the same manner as branded retail environments. They do not allow for easy browsing nor is the customer journey aesthetically pleasing. To further encourage people to buy reused and reclaimed clothing, digital tools could be leveraged, providing an online stock of what is available. As the shared and circular economy begins to permeate the American marketplace, new opportunities for branded thrift store experiences could captures these youth generations and extend the customer base as well.

Future Survey Implications

Consumer Mindfulness

After the research study concluded, multiple participants reported having benefited from reflecting upon their consumer habits. Prior to their participation, these individuals did not explicitly contemplate the reasoning for their clothing preferences and the impact of their actions. For future research studies, it would be advantageous to conduct a post research survey to observe if their behaviors were positively impacted by.

Mindful Design

Utilizing surveys that indirectly mirror individual's reasoning through simple exercises has the potential to establish a precedence before designing. By taking a moment to slow down and consider what we perceive, believe, and the reasons why, we can confront both our positive and negative biases before the design process begins. Ensuring that creatives are acutely aware of their perspective and comprehension of the problem, designers can make more adept and empathetic design decisions leading to more successful ideas.

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