



## MASTER'S DISSERTATION

# THE PARADOX BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY AND FASHION: IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

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**SUPERVISOR:** Professor Mafalda Nogueira

PORTO'S SCHOOL, JUNE, 2022



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Dissertation presented to IPAM, to fulfill the requirements needed to obtain the master's degree in Marketing, developed under the scientific supervision of Professor Mafalda Nogueira Ph.D.

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## ABSTRACT

The fashion industry is the fourth most damaging industry in the world and the detriment to the environment is going as fast as the industry is growing, making it critical to explore sustainable practices to cut the problem at the root, the consumers. Hence, this dissertation aims to understand the possibility of implementing sustainable education in the fashion industry for the Gen Z of the Portuguese market. This research uses a qualitative approach done with thirteen interviews which were interpreted with a content analysis to identify and analyze the perceptions of Gen Z consumers on fashion brands and sustainable practices in the industry. This work was designed from the concept of consumer education to provide insights of Gen Z consumers on how it can be adapted for sustainability purposes to help fashion businesses become greener. To do such implementation this study also set out to identify the type of consumer present in the sample for an optimum outcome. Results showed a lack of knowledge from Gen Z about sustainability as well as an absence of curiosity if not for personal gain, there was also a global judgment of deceitfulness by brands on the matter of green practices. Lastly, Type 1: Consumer Information, Protection and Advocacy and Type 3: Critical Approach for Self-interest were identified within the sample of Gen Z Portuguese consumers, given that the latter was less prominent. Overall, the introduction of sustainable education seems promising for this generation's improvement as

well as a mutual dialogue between fashion brands and consumers to reach a better and more sustainable future.

## **RESUMO**

A indústria da moda é a quarta indústria mais prejudicial do mundo e os danos provocados no meio ambiente estão a ser tão rápidos quanto o crescimento da indústria, tornando-se fundamental explorar práticas sustentáveis para cortar o problema na raiz, os consumidores. Assim, esta dissertação visa compreender a possibilidade de implementação da educação sustentável na indústria da moda para a geração Z do mercado português. Esta pesquisa utiliza uma abordagem qualitativa feita com treze entrevistas que foram interpretadas com uma análise de conteúdo para identificar e analisar as percepções dos consumidores da Geração Z sobre marcas de moda e práticas sustentáveis na indústria. Este trabalho foi concebido a partir do conceito de educação do consumidor para fornecer insights aos consumidores da Geração Z sobre como ela pode ser adaptada para fins de sustentabilidade para ajudar as empresas de moda a se tornarem mais verdes. Para fazer tal implementação este estudo também se propôs a identificar o tipo de consumidor presente na amostra para um resultado ótimo. Os resultados mostraram uma falta de conhecimento da Geração Z sobre sustentabilidade, bem como uma ausência de curiosidade, se não para ganho pessoal, houve também um julgamento global de falsidade por parte das marcas na questão das práticas verdes. Por último, o

Tipo 1: Informação, Proteção e Advocacia do Consumidor e o Tipo 3: Abordagem Crítica do Interesse Próprio foram identificados na amostra de consumidores portugueses da Geração Z, dado que este último foi menos proeminente. No geral, a introdução da educação sustentável parece promissora para o aprimoramento desta geração, bem como um diálogo mútuo entre marcas de moda e consumidores para alcançar um futuro melhor e mais sustentável.

***Sustainable Education; Educated Consumer; Sustainable Fashion Brands; Business Models; Consumer Educators.***

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, fashion is seen as a self-expression tool which also means that, like the human mind, it is in constant change, leading to an excess of products created by businesses. The fashion industry is the fourth most damaging industry to the environment and this detriment is going as fast as the industry is growing, which should be as high as 1,705.53\$ billion in 2021 (Raynal-Peceny & Špecián, 2021). Society is slowly starting to reach the obvious conclusion that if this rapid pace of destruction continues, there will be no future for the next generations. This is a reflection on the purchasing habits of our society with 35% of Millennials and 36% of Gen-Z affirming that they will prefer making a more “sustainable” and “environmentally-friendly” choice when purchasing clothing (Fashion Revolution, 2020). Keeping up with this need for sustainability is a new challenge for some, but other companies previewed such need and focused their business model solely on sustainability. With all of this in mind, fashion is clearly one sector of the economy that needs greater sustainable business model integration (SBM). According to Boons and Lüdeke-Freund (2013), a business model establishes a link between the specific business and the larger production and consumption system in which it operates.

Consumers live in a world with constant information being thrown at them and specially with sustainability being such a hot topic nowadays, to be

able to connect brands and consumers to such matter there is a need to incorporate more education towards both ends. Consumer's education is facilitating like behavior charged with creating an educational setting where learners can expand their moral character, citizen competence and collaborative teamwork (McGregor, 2005). To educate the consumer means to empower them with the personal autonomy to make informed decisions in a consumption setting. Individuals concerned about their responsibilities to themselves, social justice, and the global environment will only benefit from such education if they have a critical understanding of how society works, the nature of environmental problems, and the links and conflicts between them (McGregor, 2005).

Designers have altered the fashion industry to embrace sustainable business models like the ones stated earlier to respond to the need of sustainable practices within the industry. The great majority of creators have produced collections and product lines utilizing renewable or sustainable materials to address the difficulties generated by the business and, hopefully, begin to solve them. Brands are constantly "turning green" to address the issues at hand by altering their marketing techniques and declaring that they want to contribute to the development of sustainable fashion (Vynogradova et al., 2021). Profit-making firms that promote, develop, and support social change, particularly sustainability, are quickly becoming the standard (Joule, 2010).

The information found connects us to the urgent demand of sustainability (Todeschini et al., 2017) and the way brands are approaching it with greener practices, and the contrast between the perception of consumers of sustainability and the brands' (Joule, 2010). And lastly, the concept of sustainable education, which is based on the work of Sterling (2001) of assisting the individual to be someone with purpose and critical thinking to sustain long term results. The amount of information found on this matter, told us that this can be easily adapted to the fashion industry's business model and even put into practice by programs such as the one implemented by the European Commission from 2014-2020 (*EUR-Lex - 32014R0254 - EN - EUR-Lex, 2014*) that had many initiatives adhere to it, but none were indicated specifically towards brands. In this sense, the main purpose of this research is to provide insights on how consumer education can be integrated into businesses and understand consumers views and help brands to provide a better future for society and the environment.

With all that said, the research question at hand is: "How can the fashion industry implement sustainable education onto Gen Z consumers' purchasing habits in the market?". And to better conceptualize this study, the main goal is to ***better understand how sustainable education can be implemented in fashion industry among the Gen Z consumers in Portugal.*** The specific objectives of this investigation are *analyzing the different strategies on how the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business models;*

*assess Gen Z's perception of fashion brands: their practices and actions; and characterize the type of educated consumer present in the Portuguese market.*

The relevance of this study is concentrated on the lack of recognition of the importance sustainable education in the Portuguese market, more specifically, in fashion brands disclosure to consumers. The subject of sustainable education, as mentioned previously, is very much present in the European Commission plans for the education system (DG SANCO, 2009). Although, it is not implemented in most business models of fashion brands which leads to a lack of recognition of environmental impact and information for better practices to their consumers (Joule, 2010; Vynogradova et al., 2021). There is a need for investigating the consumers perception of sustainable practices implemented by brands to explore the need to apply sustainable education in brands to create greener habits on the industry and onto their current and future consumers.

This study is structured as follows, literature review that explores in detail the objectives previously set, followed by the methodology chosen for the subject in matter, consequently the findings appear next with the results found on the research. On the next chapter is the discussion of such findings connected with the research made on the literature review and lastly, the conclusions of this study and the references are presented.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is designated for search and review of previous works to explain the choice of theme for this research, it is divided into three main topics and each of them have a variety of subtopics depending on the subject. The main topics are: The Implementation of Sustainable Business Models in the Fashion Industry; Bridging the Gap Between Brands' and Bridging the Gap Between Brands' and Consumer's Perception of Sustainability; and Education of the Responsible Consumer. This topic selection was made with the research questions in mind, in order to *analyze the different strategies on how the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business models* it makes sense to review work on the implementation of sustainable business models in the fashion industry, to better *assess Gen Z's perception of sustainable fashion brands: their practices and actions* is necessary to do research on bridging the gap between brands' and consumer's perception of sustainability. And finally, *to characterize the type of educated consumer present in the Portuguese market* it is crucial to explore precedents in Education of the Responsible Consumer.



## **1.1.THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODELS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

Over the past decades, the fashion industry has been through a dramatic expansion mostly due to the rise of the fast fashion approach combined with the high levels of overconsumption deep-seated in our society (Todeschini et al., 2017). This all takes place due to the rapid pace of our present day, which has been developing for many years with people creating habits out of fast acquisition and disposal of mass-produced products while trying to keep up with the momentum of fashion. By stimulating a widespread consumption of easily replaced items, fast fashion has had significant impact on the degradation of the environmental and social behavior (Todeschini et al., 2017). The European Environmental Agency (2014) has ranked textiles and footwear fourth on the list of industries by impact on the environment, after Housing, Transport, Travel and Food, it is a major contributor to various environmental and social issues, such as air and water pollution loss of biodiversity, land degradation, low wages, unsafe working conditions, and use of child labor (Fletcher, 2013; Laitala et al., 2018; Pal and Gander, 2018).

### **1.1.1. Concept and Importance of Sustainable Business models**

With all that in mind, fashion is undoubtedly one area of the economy which needs more integration of Sustainable Business Models (SBM). A

business model “provides a link between the individual firm and the larger production and consumption system in which it operates” (Boons and Lüdeke-Freund, 2013). In SBM, it is trivial to explore the production system, such as circular supply chains (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018), circular BMs (Jabbour et al., 2019; Rosa et al., 2019), or sustainable production (Pal and Gander, 2018). Corporations that are sustainably business based need to educate themselves about their consumer’s preferences to know what socially and environmentally friendly attributes to implement in their value proposition that are going to cause desire. The SBM concept has its basis on Business Model (BM) literature, which describes the construction of creating, delivering and capturing value in an organization (Osterwalder et al., 2005; Teece, 2010). Sustainable business models are what can be perceived as an extension of the BM (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018) but with a clear focus on what the business model lacks, the social and environmental effects of running a business (Joyce and Paquin, 2016; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008).

Academic research regarding sustainable business models is relatively new but it is in constant growing due to the rapid concern for our ecological footprint, since the article published by Stubbs and Cocklin (2008). The analysis into SBMs has been focusing on topics such as taxonomies (Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2018), archetypes (Bocken et al., 2014), or pattern databases (Remane et al., 2017) of SBMs, as well as firm’s willingness (Schaltegger et al., 2012) and extent (Gauthier and Gilomen, 2016) of embracing sustainability in

their BMs. The prosperous development of SBM requires a constant care for the adaptation to the changing conditions of the market, thus giving the opportunity for the company to keep with the competition action (Vynogradova et al., 2021). To be able to keep up with the pace of society, companies should track innovations and trends in business management as whole and within the specific industry as well.

According to Vynogradova (2021), there is an approach to sustainability in business that not only aims to minimize the negative impact of their business activities, but at the same time gains an understanding of how to create a meaningful positive impact in areas that are important to the society and the planet, called Business Sustainability 3.0. A company which takes this kind of approach takes the challenges that come with sustainability and turns them into business opportunities. This approach requires an outside-in organizational perspective, which translates into shifting the focus to society and its sustainability challenges instead of the business itself, this is a similar approach to the one that Levi Strauss & co. has. There are essential criteria that a fashion company must have to go in this trajectory: implementing two or more Sustainable Development Goals (SGD's); usage of sustainable fabrics or other parts of apparel; implementing the Sustainable International certification programs or Eco-Quality standards; their suppliers must practice sustainable practices as well, to guarantee the sustainability of the supply chain; and need to have demonstrated a strategy towards achieving Net Zero by 2030.

The approach of Business Sustainability 3.0 should be incorporated by established brands in their ideology but also in brands that are being created in this era where sustainability is key. Three years ago, Pangaia was created with clear goal of sustainability at their business's core. This is a brand characterized by its minimal ethical philosophy with a focus on solving environmental issues and is dedicated to a zero-waste circular system that utilizes repurposed or recycled materials (Cheng, 2018 cited by Vynogradova et al., 2021). The prime component of Pangaia's business model is their adherence to Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) e-commerce. D2C e-commerce is an innovative strategy that turns the traditional B2B business and starts selling directly to the end consumers via an online platform. With this method, Pangaia has been able to cut out the middleman and have total control of the supply chain, and with that control of the company's reputation by having direct contact with the end consumer, this leads to a stronger relationship with the consumer with increased interaction (Vynogradova et al., 2021). The revenue comes not only from the direct sales but also from "B2B textile sales, material materials licensing and brand partnerships for materials R&D" (Roberts-Islan, 2019). The brand's business model corresponds to the first criteria that was establish by Vynogradova (2021): implementing two or more of the SDG's, their climate action pillars outline how to protect biodiversity by minimizing our environmental footprint. It also correspond the second criteria of Vynogradova (2021): usage of sustainable fabrics or other parts of apparel, they pioneer and use materials that consider the delicate balance between sustainability,

functionality and purpose. Their items are all marketed as unisex and they use materials like seaweed fiber (biodegradable), organic cotton (from natural seeds), recycled materials, FLWRDWN (alternative to duck and goose gown) and compostable packaging.

Some of the biggest fashion brands have demonstrated concern by determining to stop the usage of plastic, minimize pollution and take more care about the environment but this will not be enough if we want to have a better future. The implementation of SBM must be accomplished by the greatest number of companies in the fashion industry or else it most create an impact in the issues that we are facing (Vynogradova et al., 2021).

The implementation of sustainable business models must be aligned with the principles for a better future, but these actions will not succeed if the brand does it only for the perceived image of sustainability to please the market and better profitability. Their perception of better future must be centered with the green practices and actions needed.

### **1.1.2.Brands' Perception of Sustainability**

To respond to the demand of sustainable practices within the business, designers have reshaped the fashion industry embracing sustainable business models like the ones previously mentioned. To address the issues caused by the

industry and hopefully to start solving them, most creators have developed collections and product lines using renewable or sustainable materials. Brands are continuously “going green” to face the matters at hand by making changes in their marketing strategies and stating that they would like to make a difference in the development of sustainable fashion (Vynogradova et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, there is still a significant contrast between what brands claim and what they practice. Based on Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir (2019) and Blowfield and Murray (2008), SBM are considered environmental responsibilities and codes of conduct inclusions, which have a clear focus on circularity in the production process. It is also stated that the brands are changing their BM from linear to circular, to focus on sustainability. The industry oversees the life cycle of products, where new items are thrown away not because they are worn out but because they run its course in the fashion trends set by the marketing strategies. There is an urgency to cope with the lack of sustainability within the supply chain, much like what Levi Strauss & Co. has done by, more than twenty years ago, rebranding their whole business model to put sustainability at its core (Joule, 2010).

As previously mentioned, some brands are already being created with this business model, as Pangaia. This is a brand which gained its popularity by celebrities’ endorsements and by their revolutionary ideology of *high-tech*

*naturalism*, the name says it all — Pan (all inclusive) and Gaia (mother earth).

Pangaia's brand stands out on the fashion market due to many factors but specially by being "a direct-to-consumer materials science company bringing breakthrough textile innovations and patents into the world through everyday lifestyle products" (Pangaia, 2021 cited by Vynogradova et al., 2021).

Sustainability is cared for in all levels of the company, with the final product being "sustainable, essential-based apparel" (Pangaia, 2021 cited by Vynogradova et al., 2021). The company has its own R&D facility comprising the scientists, technologies, and designer, culminating in a material science business. The materials are sourced by bio-based fibers that are then dyed from plants and coated with antibacterial peppermint to reduce washing. Pangaia has also created impact by supporting the protection of biodiversity by minimizing our environmental footprint with the creation of two funds: the Three Fund - that plants, protects and restore trees with every purchase; and the SeaTrees - project that is restoring and protecting the 26 hectares of degraded mangrove forest in the West Papua region of Indonesia and employing local villagers to do so. One of the company's main characteristics is being vegan friendly, which was achieved after spending 10 years developing a breakthrough vegan technology, PANGAIA flowerdown, all the fabrics are either plant-based or lab-grown, and one of the company's aims is to build awareness for vegan brands and their products (Vynogradova et al., 2021).

With the analysis of brands' perception of sustainability, it has become clear that these sustainable practices are a must in the fashion industry and that creates the need to further investigate research about this demand.

### **1.1.3. The Need for Sustainable Practices in the Fashion Industry**

The fashion system only recycles or reuses about 20% of clothing with huge amounts of products ending in landfills or are incinerated (Global Footprint Network, 2017 cited by Pal & Gander, 2018). One of these biggest problems in the environmental impact of the industry is the overstock that often is called *deadstock*, it happens frequently fashion companies burn their unsold products. In 2017 H&M was the target of allegations, that the company had burnt 12 tones of unsold but usable clothes and, that same year, it was reported that H&M was destroying discarded clothing with recycled wood and trash in the city of Västerås, as part of a project to help a Swedish power plant to convert oil and coal-fired generation into fossil fuel-free facility by 2020 (Farmbrough, 2018). The major problem with the incineration of products is that even if some energy is recovered from it, it inevitably worsens the impact of the product, generation further emissions and air pollutants. The high probability of plastic microfibers being released in the atmosphere and the CO2 emissions doubling is not only from production, but from its destruction also.



Linear economy is one of the main environmental problems in the industry and the issues are not all concentrated at the end a products life cycle but also in the production. The water resources alone that are required to grow and process enough cotton to produce a simple t-shirt is around 600 liters (Turley, 2009). This is a period in which humans are facing “water bankruptcy” (UNESCO, 2009) and where demand for water is increasing and its access is limited, due to the growing levels of pollution.

After analyzing the all the sustainable aspects that are required to integrate into fashion business models to have a better future within the industry, there is a need to understand if the concept and perception of sustainability adopted by brands is adopted the same way in the consumers’ minds.

## **1.2. BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN BRANDS’ AND CONSUMERS’ PERCEPTION OF SUSTAINABILITY**

With the high demand for a better society towards a more sustainable consumption there is a demand of alignment of approaches from both consumers and brands. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has established goals and visions order to limit the threat of climate change, more specifically, the 2015 Paris Agreement declared actions that help reducing global warming on average to 2°C above pre-industrial levels (Stöckigt et al., 2018). This translates to limited carbon dioxide emissions and a need for responsible use of natural resources from governments,

businesses, and consumers, with this in mind companies started to implement corporate social responsibility into their businesses. What this means is that they employed business strategies that try to shoulder responsibility for the impact that businesses have on the climate change or society. Originally created in 1950s for companies to obey the law (Valor, 2005), the term later developed in the 1990s on the one hand, it maintains the concept that a company is an entity with status like a person and to relate corporate action to greater societal accountability and serve for mutual benefit (Waddell, 2000).

The information that companies give to consumers can influence their attitudes towards them and their products (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015), attitude which can be either bad or good depending on how aligned the company's and the consumer's values are. These corporate social responsibilities contribute for a greater offer of sustainable products, but this supposed sustainability is, sometimes, a mere marketing claim (Stöckigt et al., 2018). If a consumer can distinct between what is a marketing claim and what is a proper sustainable product depends highly on their knowledge about sustainability. If a consumer has an advanced know-how on sustainable practices, they will know how to evaluate claims critically and trust those who show conniving efforts regarding sustainability (Park and Kim, 2016). In comparison, consumers that have limited education on the subject will tend to be less affects by sustainability claims (Park and Kim, 2016). There is also a study by Kumar et al. (2017) that shows the effect of environmental knowledge

on purchase intention regarding sustainable products, as well as the work by Paul et al. (2016) concluded that consumers that possess a positive attitude towards sustainability and environmental concern are more likely to make efforts to reduce their impacts. Attitude which can be influenced by the sustainable practices of retailers (Tsarenko et al., 2013).

There is a need to emphasize the responsibility of the consumer in terms of sustainable development (Buerkle et al., 2016), they can engage in sustainable lifestyles in different ways: environmental protection, social development, and economic development. This position is not an easy one, contributing to sustainability is a decision-making process that includes weighing up subjective costs and benefits (Stöckigt et al., 2018). The result of this process is not only influenced by the situation in question but also by attributes of the deciding individual. A study made by Luchs et al. (2010) showed that companies promoting sustainable products should associate them with a strength branding, and with that promotional techniques and product positioning can affect customers' sustainability awareness of products, therefore resolving such issues.

With this said, it is necessary to study the relationship between brand and consumer to have an insight into the influence of both ends on each other's actions and purchasing habits.

Sustainability is key for balance between the economical, social, and environmental needs of today and the demands for future generations (Wang et al., 2019). In business this means building economic growth, corporate reputation, customer relationships, quality, and service, all while displaying corporate responsibility (CSR) in creating sustainable employment opportunities, creating values for stakeholders, and meeting underserved needs (Chang, Jan, Lee, Lee, & Chang, 2017; Mazanov & Woolf, 2017). The total environmental impact of product manufacture and consumption addresses the sustainability efforts (Peattie, 2001). Sustainable marketing targets sustainable economic development (van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996) in a sustainable economy (Hunt, 2011). Regarding sustainable operations, companies need to integrate goals, policies, ideologies, and action plans that share a common “worldview” (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008) connecting with economic, ecological, and social sustainability (Savitz & Weber, 2006). To declare corporate sustainability is implying that all aspects of the company’s performance are sustainable (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011), from the employees’ behavior to conduct in the value chain (Fiksel, McDaniel, & Mendenhall, 1999). Companies that want to implement sustainable performance should provide training and evaluate employees accordingly (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012).

Consumers when deciding to repurchase, generally form their decision around their perception of quality, price, and fissionability (Wang et al., 2019). When finding a sustainable company, they will be loyal, and the company is

likely looking at long term profitability (Székely & Knirsch, 2005). To counter the extreme waste caused by the fashion industry, fashion companies are developing eco-efficiency approaches in which recycling is encouraged throughout the supply chain (Ciasullo, Cardinali, & Cosimato, 2017). To meet environmental concerns and market demands for environmental sustainability, fashion companies turn to biodegradable or recycled materials (Wong, 2012). Environmental management practices, recyclable products, and reduced packaging waste are especially needed (Wong, Lai, Shang, Lu, & Leung, 2012) to better fast fashion's perception of low-priced, low-quality, frequently replace, and wasteful fashion products that have short life cycles (Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011). Product design is crucial in value co-creation (Niinimäki, 2010), because when consumers are committed and companies put effort into creating value, both can enjoy socially valuable co-creation approaches (Wang et al., 2019). Often, fashion consumers have a sense of being socially superior and responsible which is commonly showed by their choice in ethical brands (Niinimäki, 2010). Brands can increase profit by showing social responsibility, which requires redirecting company resources for purposes other than profit. Corporate responsibility generally requires from companies and employees to share core values that involve corporate branding and stakeholder perceptions (Knox & Maklan, 2004). With CSR in mind, keeping fashion products culturally diverse allows designers to maintain consumer diversity and comparative advantage with that costumers may perceive that high-fashion brands has to adhere to higher environmental protection requirements such as recycling and waste reduction (Wang et al., 2019).

With this chapter being about the union of perceptions of consumers and brands, it can be said that the notion that consumers can easily put an end to their relationship with costumers if they do not feel in sync with their actions, is something that happens quite frequently (Hemetsberger et al., 1999; Van Trijip, Hoyer, and Inman, 1996). With that said, the continuous fight for a balance in sustainability in business is the key to make consumers more emotionally attached to the brand and with that aligned their concepts of a greener future (Wang et al., 2019).

Another matter that will help the cooperation of both ends will be sustainable education. This the subject that is going to be explored more in the next chapter with an explanation to why the “education of responsible consumer” is the key to a greater prospect for the fashion industry.

### **1.3. EDUCATION OF THE RESPONSIBLE CONSUMER**

There is no denying the number of destructive effects human activities have on this planet, only those who choose not to see can ignore the hardships that have been caused by the recklessness of humans such as poverty, malnutrition, and violence. Except for those equipped to analyze and think critically, most will not understand the magnitude of the consequences and choices that must be made to create a better future for ourselves and our planet

(Orr, 2001 cited by Sterling, 2013). The chaos that humans have created is due to the prior disorder embedded in the archetype of human domination that has now spread worldwide. To change, we must come to the realization, that we as individuals are not simply isolated from our actions and the world, every single choice we make as consumers has an impact on the environment, and all that together is making a big dent that will become quickly impossible to mend if action is not taken (Orr, 2001 cited by Sterling, 2013).

Our capability to attain a livable future for us all depends on whether we can foster an unprecedented degree of social learning. “There is no change without learning, and no learning without change” (Sterling, p.1, 2021). The educational system has a fundamental role in the global social learning process to make for better and more sustainable future. According to Stephen Sterling (2001), the quality, depth, and dimension of learning that occurs worldwide during the next ten to twenty years is critical for the human future. Sterling claims that most education simply reinforces practices and pathologies that cannot and should not be sustained over the long term. To contrast, he suggests an education that assists the entire person, including the spirit, ears, head, and hands, and restores the conventional tradition of education to set up young individuals with purpose and critical thinking. This concept of education goes beyond the formal approach to schooling and more towards a concept of ongoing re-creation or co-evolution in which education and society are in a mutually transformative connection (Sterling, 2001).

As observed in the last few decades, sustainable education has been a vessel on the movement for change in educational thinking and practice but, unfortunately, has not been able to cause an impactful shift within the educational systems it is incorporated in. This misconnection between westernized formal education and dynamic learning needed to fight society's problems is becoming more noticeable. The struggle to implement such change is being caused by the influence and resistance of political parties which have been caught in the neoliberal thought that is completely ignorant to face rapid global change. At its core, education for the sustainable responsible consumer aims to nurture transformative learning experiences that can heal, empower, energize, and liberate potential for the common good (S. Sterling, 2018). The argument made by Sterling and that is proved by the lack of evolution within the educational system, is that this structure is unable to support such learning experiences unless such institutions have or are experiencing sufficient transformational processes consistent with this ideology. The idea of education for change is immensely important for the world's future, but such education will not be a source of personal and social change if educational thinking and policy does not change as well.

For the purpose of such education there need to be a shift on how it is taught to consumers, Sue McGregor (2005) explains in her research that consumer empowerment is the imminent for the responsible consumer and that is going to be explained in depth in the next chapter.



### **1.3.1.From Consumer Education to Consumer Empowerment**

The relevance of consumer education relies on the fact that we, as humans, are all consumers, whether you are a child spending your penny at a local shop, an adult buying Christmas gifts or going to the supermarket to buy your monthly groceries, these are all decisions we make as consumers. With the independence given by consumer knowledge we can make the right choices regarding sustainability and ethics while getting the most out of our money in the process (DG SANCO, 2009). There is a general approach of what consumer education is: the action of educating an empowered consumer with access to information on the market and its competition (McGregor, 2005). This empowered consumer will then take advantage of such knowledge by being confident, assertive, and self-reliant as well as upholding himself in his consumption habits. The well-educated consumer is empowered to make the right decisions because it was informed with the right financial and social information to do so by educators. This has led to industry and marketing discoveries, with articles calling the empowerment of such consumer a threat to their future (Tohmatsu, 2004 cited by McGregor, 2005), because according to them it made them more powerful than retailers, which up to this point had been controlling their decisions. The firm has even come up with the phrase *powersumer*, to represent the power people now must shop and buy at their own terms, instead of those dictated by stores. With this also came the fear that if the customer has all the information, then it will have a better chance to take

advantage of the *firm* (McGregor, 2005), which ultimately will lead to better competition within the fashion business. As previously mentioned, this knowledge has led to a detachment of consumers with brands due to being able to see through the image they are trying to portray, ruining the relationship previously established which ultimately shows in a loss of profit. In consummation, the definition that Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (2004) gives the empowered consumer is, one who has a wealth of information from multiple sources and countless options in a marketplace replete with a wealth of competition. The arrival of this empowered consumer came with a shift of focus from marketers to reach them to groom their relationships and buying habits, because it is believed that this kind of consumer cannot be pitched but rather be *engaged*.

Educating the consumer enables them to use such advice and information and build empowerment within themselves to make wise and efficient choices. In the 1999 National Consumer Education Partnership (NCEP), the learning outcomes predicted that people educated using this program will act responsibly towards the community in general and comprehend the impact that their actions have locally and globally while also analyzing the fallout of their behavior in the environment and society. The consumer movement evolution over the past 50 years has led to the conclusion of this focus on consumer consciousness of environmental and social impact on consuming decisions (McGregor, 2005). Wells and Wells and Atherton (1998) notes that

consumers that are self-assured feel in charge and can make educated decisions for themselves and also that consumer education promotes society as a whole by making citizens more engaged and well-informed.

Sue McGregor (2005) claims an alternative concept of consumer education, defending that giving someone information doesn't empower them but instead creates the ability to do something, this empowerment can only provide a sense of authority to act - *inner perception of power*. Inner power can only be achieved by oneself, it cannot be given by another. In the major sense of the word empowerment is associated with creating an increase in political, economic, and social strength in individuals which incorporate the minorities of this society, the marginalized, exploited, discriminated, and excluded. For someone to find their inner power they must go on a personal quest to assume responsibility for their actions. A consumer educator's job is to establish a secure learning environment in which consumers may examine their beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and worldview (McGregor, 2005). If there is an embracement of this critical reflective process it will lead to a sense of personal power: *me-power*, gained from experience and insights. For there to be a responsible and empowered consumer in the future, consumer education needs to take on a critical pedagogical approach.

The outcome of such educational will be a consumer that distinguishes themselves by having the ability to act and control of circumstances regarding their daily lives. With this singularity he will act with integrity to create the

environment in which society can develop a morally responsible behavior (McGregor, 2005).

There is a need to further the knowledge on consumer educators to better understand their role in this journey of the responsible consumer.

### **1.3.1.1. Consumer Educators**

Consumer educators aiming to facilitate like behavior are charged with creating an educational setting where learners can expand their moral character, citizen competence and collaborative teamwork (McGregor, 2005). To educate someone means giving them personal autonomy and a critical conscience, with that said, it only makes sense that the target of such education was the promotion of an active and efficient citizen in consumer issues. Such education will only succeed in preparing individuals concerned about their obligations towards themselves, social justice, and global environment if they have a critical approach of how society works, of the nature of environmental problems and their connections and contradictions. This process requires more than a scientific approach but a rather holistic one for this consumer to foster and reinforce attitudes, values and behavior that matches this path.

Regardless of this ideology, after analyzing the content of this process it is still centered in the conventional consumer empowerment, in giving them

information and advises, and teach them that they have rights and possibilities, in comparison to the one suggested by Sue McGregor (2005). There is a need to say that there is some evidence that supports the statements made by the conventional side, in the DOLCETA (DG SANCO, 2009) framework it can be observed that one of their four different knowledge areas is the *Responsible Consumer and Services*, which is then concentrated in the aims of the program, with Sustainability, Impact on local Economy and Impact on Global Economy being three of them. Then it goes on to a deeper level regarding an aim to inspire people to think about their needs and wants on a personal level and make value-based decisions while also help them to make judgments that may have ramifications for the entire community, which shows a concern from the society, but still is a fracture of a whole education very centralized on the individual. This is the argument that Sue McGregor (2005) does in her research that there is a significant difference between an empowered consumer with purchasing power and then the empowered citizen acting in his/her consumer role. The first being someone that helps serve his/her own interests and the second helps people serve the common interest.

Still within the program funded by DG SANCO (2005), DOLCETA it is highlighted that alongside the skills, knowledge and attitude consumers also need the confidence to address consumer issues. By achieving a sense of awareness and developing consumer competences, individuals are believed to build a healthier and more sustainable oriented lifestyle and recognize the importance of the consumers' role.

The programs funded by DG SANCO (2005) are a subject to be explored in the next chapter because their creation was made by the European Commission with the purpose of better educating their citizens with sustainable practices. This is relevant to this study for a greater comprehension of the existing consumer education and to take note of can be applied to the sustainable education in the fashion industry.

### **1.3.2.Types of Educated Consumers**

Referring to the empowered consumer suggested by Sue McGregor (2005), which the author describes as an empowered citizen acting in his/her consumer role which ultimately will help serve the common interest. This matter leads us to the topic relationship between the way consumer education is taught and the kind of consumer that is formed, which is represented in this study through a summary of the work of Sandlin (2004) and Flowers (2001) and an extension of their thinking by the author herself. Forthwith, it will be represented the four types of consumer education and, consequently, the types of educated consumer.

### **1.3.2.1. Type 1: Consumer Information, Protection and Advocacy**

This type of education is taught with the purpose to navigate the consumer world and make better decisions by providing or transferring information. This consumer is taught about his rights and, with in less extent, responsibilities, also he will be educated with technical skills, such as, budget, interest, etc. with an intent to avoid markets that exploit users. There will be also learnings about consumer protection and competition policies which will be complemented with consumer advocacy and redress.

The kind of consumer resulted by such education will be one that understands consumerism as good and natural and consider that one must participate in the consumer culture, due to them being the key role in the economy. This will lead to a vision of consumerism to self-development, self-resilience and self-realization which translates to a mindset where success equals money, prestige, accumulation brand name products.

### **1.3.2.2. Type 2: Individual Critique for Self-interest**

Within this learning, the main lesson is to question the role of consumption in their own lives, taking responsibility for their self, questioning leads people to make individual changes in their spending patterns and lifestyles.

This is going to shape a consumer into focusing on their self-interest which means their level of reflection is still unrefined, this is going to be the beginning of the consumer wondering what it means to live in a consumer society with a focus on environmental impact. The individual is going to start to take actions to simplify their own lifestyle while also edifying their choices, which will mean he will be too busy downshifting to reflect on the structure of the consumer society and the market as the real problem at hand.

### **1.3.2.3. Type 3: Critical Approach for Self-interest**

In this schooling the student is taught to be critical of those who occupy the role of the consumer and of the context within which they consume (market and consumer society). Gives information on structural factors and economic and social inequities that disempower the consumers to act in their own self-interest, while teaching them to be reflective on their lifestyle and make changes so the current system is not cultivated.

This will result in ethical consumers, green consumers, or anti-consumers, which will be able to recognize the deep impact of the hegemony of consumption. This will be someone who does not accept consumerism as a natural part of life and ironically, will see this consumer culture as a perfect place to resist it. Resistance will be shown by the strive to interrupt the daily flow of consumerism making others aware of how pervasive it really is in their



lives. The main goal with this type of education is to free oneself from the grasp of the market.

#### **1.3.2.4. Type 4: Empowerment Approach for Mutual Interest**

This is the extension which Sue McGregor contributed to the work of Sandlin and Flowers, which takes type 3 even further by getting past self-interest into mutual interest. Doing so by adopting a pedagogy that facilitates people finding their inner power and potential, with that it also shows how to challenge the current global, national, and local systems. It makes them go beyond their own private bubble to a common good and common interest while also including teachings on social and human impact of consumption. It explains that we can have a more authentic culture than the one it currently exists and that anyone can be a leader and has the potential to do so.

To have this mentality means to be a global citizen and a consumer second, and to have found their inner power and the potential as a citizen to change the world for the better. This is a person who is not afraid to challenge and change the system rather than just changing people and their individual lifestyles, like Type 3. Someone who believes in the holistic approach, where everything is connected, and knows that once someone becomes empowered, it is a self-sustaining lifelong process. And finally, is an individual who possesses

a deeply held, personally validated value system that cherishes all life, past, present, and future.

Finally, the research reaches the point of our research goal which is to understand how the concept of consumer education, that it has been described throughout the last chapters, can be integrated in fashion business models.

### **1.3.3. Sustainable Education in Fashion Business Models**

It can be said that running a profitable business while advocating for sustainability makes for a nearly perfect business model in the present market (Joule, 2010). It does come as shock that new and existing companies are looking for new ways to thrive in such a competitive environment with innovative business models while being socially and environmentally responsible (Todeschini et al., 2017). The norm is fast becoming profit-making businesses that promote, generate and champion social change, notably sustainability (Joule, 2010).

The business environment is quickly transforming into one where sustainability holds its core to its profitability and ability to innovate with the flow of the market and continuously create value for its customers. In short, sustainability is becoming the new price admission to the mass marketplace (Joule, 2010). When a brand does not try to protect the natural resources

without which they would not be able to continuously produce their products, it means they will not be able to sell said products for much longer. This is called *conscious capitalism*; a company must protect its resources to protect its profits. Conscious capitalism should not be an option nowadays, but rather something incorporated into a business's values. This is a simple concept; the business community has a vested interest in a sustainable future because its livelihood depends on it. Companies can also help shape and drive the context to ensure a better cycle of sustainable (and sustained) demand as it affects sustained supply (Joule, 2010).

A great example of excellence in both sustainability and profitability in their business model is Levi Strauss & Co., a company that was founded back in 1853 and that more than 20 years ago became a pioneer in sustainable business models in the fashion industry. Levi's revolutionized the market by putting sustainability at the core of their business model and with their first action being the implementation of "Terms of Engagement" (Joule, 2010), a workplace code of conduct for its suppliers. Their values with this initiative were, according to Walter Haas, president of the company from 1958 to 1969, "No corporation can prosper fully or long in a society frustrated by social ills and upheaval." (Joule, p.16, 2010). With time these values evolved addressing other issues as child labor, forced labor, working hours, wages and benefits, freedom of association, discrimination, health and safety, and environmental practices. At first, when Levi Strauss & Co. implemented these terms to suppliers, competitors of the brand thought they were losing their competitive

edge in the global marketplace. But results have shown otherwise, the company opened a new path for the sustainable market with a once-radical outlook which has now become the standard for fashion business (Joule,2010).

To conclude, literature review was made with the intent to explore the existing research on the matters of sustainable business models in the fashion industry, brands and consumer's perception on sustainability and education of the responsible consumer. The next chapter focuses on the methodology that will be used for the direction of this study.

## **2.METHODOLOGY**

This chapter is about to recalling: the research goal and objectives of this investigation; an explanation for the methodology chosen, characterized as qualitative; the data collection techniques, which is going to consist of interviews; the population, sample, and sampling technique; and finally, the techniques used to analyze the collected data.

### **2.1.RESEARCH GOAL AND OBJECTIVES**

To answer the problem within the question, “How can the fashion industry implement sustainable education onto Gen Z consumers’ minds in the portuguese market?”, it was defined the main and specific objectives of this research.

The main goal of this research is to better understand how sustainable education can be implemented in fashion industry among the Gen Z consumers in Portugal. Therefore, the specific objectives are:

- Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.
- Assess Gen Z’s perception on Fashion brands, their practices, and actions towards sustainable education.
- Identify the type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.

## **2.2.METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS**

Methodology is based in the sync between theory and method, involving aspects that detail the process of research (Augusto, 2014), beyond exploring, describing and classify methods and techniques with the purpose of solving research problems (Prodanov; Freitas, 2014). With that in mind, the methodology of this study has the sole principle of exploring the chosen objectives. Therefore, the methodology utilized in this research is qualitative, which means it follows an interpretivism approach characterized by being inductivist, thus explaining the need to understand how sustainable education can be implemented in the fashion industry, as a way of perceiving the general, and subjective, because it is based on the interpretation of sustainable education in the context of the fashion industry. This methodology aims to ensure a deep level of understanding, being there for, non-quantifiable, and analyze the perceptions of Gen Z consumers towards sustainable education in their chosen fashion brands. More in-depth observation or questioning is used to answer questions, and theory is formed based on these in-depth observations and analysis.

With the main objective being the understanding of the phenomena of sustainable education within the fashion industry among Gen Z consumers, the qualitative methodology is most adequate, due to its ability to analyze behavior and attitudes by observation and questioning, which aims to understand the meanings that the subjects attribute to their actions.

## 2.3. DATA COLLECTION

Initially, the collection of data is collected from secondary sources to better frame the upcoming primary collection. The research done in the literature review will serve as a framework for this research's future, this is all found in previous works already established in the previous chapter. This is due to, in this stage of the research, the need to verify the state of art about sustainable education within the fashion industry, which means to verify it in the existing works and make a critic review of what has been already established.

Afterwards, the next phase of collection of data is through primary data, more specifically in- depth interviews, which allow to collect data for the specific purpose, critically analyze the findings, it will be tailored to the specific needs of the research questions and enables the control of such quality. With the purpose of analyzing the perception of Gen Z consumers, this requires a close analysis of their reactions and attitudes towards tailored inquiry. The interviews were made to have a closer proximity with the individual and with that, make for better interpretation of their responses to the questions made, these interviews are individual and semi-structured with open questions, which allows to cover all the subjects needed to answer the research questions but have some room for a dialogue with the interviewee to understand their view on the matter.

The guide for the interviews was made with the research objectives in mind and solely based on the established sources from the literature review. These questions were formulated to explore the ideas behind the Gen Z's perception towards sustainable education and understand the opinions about the fashion industry's influence in this matter. Consequently, within the interview it is included a display of a recent campaign for H&M "Let's change. For tomorrow." (2020) which highlights the brand's sustainability efforts for a sustainable future. The purpose of showing this ad to the interviewees was to have a visual example of the claims of fashion brands make towards sustainability and understand the interviewees' insights on what sustainable education in the fashion industry looks like. On the figure below is displayed the structure and thought process behind the interview guide and the objectives and references each question was based on.



Assess Gen Z's perception on Fashion brands, their practices, and actions towards sustainable education.	1. What do you understand by Sustainability?	Turley, 2009; UNESCO, 2009; Paul et al., 2016; Buerkle et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019; Sterling, 2013;
	4. Can you distinct a brand's sustainable practices and mere claims to do so?	Stöckigt et al., 2018; Park and Kim, 2016; Buerkle et al., 2016; Vynogradova et al., 2021; Farmbrough, 2018; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Tsarenko et al., 2013; Luchs et al. (2010)
	5. What do you think brands could do to better promote sustainability to their consumers?	Vynogradova et al., 2021; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015
Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.	2. Do you feel educated by brands about sustainable practices?	Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Luchs et al. (2010); Sterling, 2001; S. Sterling, 2018; Todeschini et al., 2017;
	3. If so, which brands?	Joule, 2010; Vynogradova et al., 2021
	11. Do you know the term "consumer educator"?	Luchs et al. (2010); McGregor, 2005; DG SANCO, 2009; Brennan et al., 2016; DG SANCO, 2012; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
	12. Do you think a fashion brand, like H&M is a good example of consumer educator?	Joule, 2010 Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001; Luchs et al. (2010); McGregor, 2005; DG SANCO, 2009; Brennan et al., 2016; DG SANCO, 2012; Todeschini et al., 2017; Jeffries, 2013;
Identify the type of consumer most common and the average type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.	6. Do you know your rights as a consumer?	Sue McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
	7. Do you think your consumption habits can make a difference for a more sustainable future?	Sterling, 2013; Wells and Wells and Atherton, 1998; Sue McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
	8. Do you feel influenced by the market to consume more and better or just more?	Pal & Gander, 2018; Vynogradova et al., 2021; Wells and Wells and Atherton, 1998; Sue McGregor, 2005;
	9. In your opinion, is consumerism inevitable as a coping mechanism today?	Wang et al., 2019; Székely & Knirsch, 2005; Sue McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
	10. Do you feel you have enough knowledge and are given enough information to avoid making unsustainable decisions?	Sue McGregor, 2005; DG SANCO, 2009; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;

Table 1: Process of the interview guide

## 2.4.SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

For this study, the sample is composed by consumers of the Gen Z generation, individuals born between 1995 and 2012, also known as iGen, Homelanders, Digital Natives, and most popularly as Gen Z or Gen Zers (Pichler, Kohli & Granitz, 2021) that make a conscious effort to. These selected consumers answered an online questionnaire through social media, and thirteen of them agreed to participate in the interviews, which concluded in a process of self-selection; the following table of contents contains the information of each participant (identification, age, and gender). After the results of the online inquiry, the study proceeded to the individual interviews to better understands the selected consumer’s perceptions of sustainable education in the fashion industry.

Interviewees:	Identification:	Age:	Gender:
Interviewee 1	I1	24	M
Interviewee 2	I2	23	F
Interviewee 3	I3	23	F
Interviewee 4	I4	22	F
Interviewee 5	I5	22	F
Interviewee 6	I6	19	F
Interviewee 7	I7	22	F
Interviewee 8	I8	24	F
Interviewee 9	I9	23	M
Interviewee 10	I10	22	M
Interviewee 11	I11	22	M
Interviewee 12	I12	23	F
Interviewee 13	I13	22	M

Table 2: Characterization of the participants of the interviews

## 2.5. DATA ANALYSIS

The main goal of this data analysis is to interpret how Gen Z views the sustainability in the fashion industry. To evaluate if there is a relationship between the sustainable brands they consume and their perception on sustainability, or if it is just a coincidence and an appreciation of the brands' products.


Throughout the study, the qualitative analysis technique that was used to analyze the data collected from the interviews, consisted of a thematic analysis based on the process of content analysis by Bardin (2011).

Researchers understand that qualitative approaches give a source of thorough, well- founded descriptions and explanations of processes in recognized local situations (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014), means that the descriptions are based on the facts yet provide insight beyond statistics (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). A thematic analysis of qualitative data consists of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and finishing. (Yin, 2011). This type of analysis goes beyond counting words or phrases and rather focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, better said, themes (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011).

According to Bardin (2011), in order to analyze the data, there has to be a codification and a categorization of the content of the interview to have a better understanding of the results. In this research the codes were previously chosen as key words for what would become the categories of content analysis:

Sustainable education, Sustainable practices by brands, Brand's communication, Consumer's perception of brands, Sustainable practices by consumers and Type of educated consumer; as seen in the figure below. The categories were then correlated with the questions from the interview guide to learn which categories fitted with which questions.

Subsequently, came the process of analyzing the data collected from the dialogues with the interviewees, which had to be transcribed into text from the audio recordings, such evaluation was made by color coding the categories previously selected, and later highlighting quotes from each transcript that corresponded to each section with the respective color.

Research Objectives	Questions	Sub-categories	References
Assess Gen Z's perception on Fashion brands, their practices, and actions towards sustainable education.	1. What do you understand by Sustainability?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainable education</li> <li>Type of educated consumer</li> </ul>	Turley, 2009; UNESCO, 2009; Paul et al., 2016; Buerkle et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019; Sterling, 2013;
Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.	2. Do you feel educated by brands about sustainable practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainable education</li> <li>Sustainable practices by brands</li> <li>Brands' communication</li> <li>Consumer's perception of brands</li> <li>Type of educated consumer</li> </ul>	Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Luchs et al. (2010); Sterling, 2001; S. Sterling, 2018; Todeschini et al., 2017;
Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.	3. If so, which brands?		Joule, 2010; Vynogradova et al., 2021
Assess Gen Z's perception on Fashion brands, their practices, and actions towards sustainable education.	4. Can you distinguish a brand's sustainable practices and mere claims to do so?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brands' communication</li> <li>Sustainable practices by brands</li> <li>Type of educated consumer</li> </ul>	Stöckigt et al., 2018; Park and Kim, 2016; Buerkle et al., 2016; Vynogradova et al., 2021; Farmbrough, 2018; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Tsarenko et al., 2013; Luchs et al. (2010)
Assess Gen Z's perception on Fashion brands, their practices, and actions towards sustainable education.	5. What do you think brands could do to better promote sustainability to their consumers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consumer's perception of brands</li> <li>Sustainable practices by brands</li> <li>Brands' communication</li> </ul>	Vynogradova et al., 2021; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015
Identify the  of consumer and the average type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.	6. Do you know your rights as a consumer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainable practices by consumers</li> <li>Type of educated consumer</li> <li>Sustainable education</li> </ul>	Sue McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
Identify the type of consumer most common and the average type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.	7. Do you think your consumption habits can make a difference for a more	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Type of educated consumer</li> <li>Sustainable practices by consumers</li> </ul>	Sterling, 2013; Wells and Wells and Atherton, 1998; Sue McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;

Identify the type of consumer most common and the average type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.	8. Do you feel influenced by the market to consume more and better or just more?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable education</li> <li>• Type of educated consumer</li> <li>• Consumer's perception of brands</li> </ul>	Pal & Gander, 2018; Vynogradova et al., 2021; Wells and Wells and Atherton, 1998; Sue McGregor, 2005;
Identify the type of consumer most common and the average type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.	9. In your opinion, is consumerism inevitable as a coping mechanism today?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brands' communication</li> <li>• Sustainable practices by consumers</li> <li>• Sustainable practices by brands</li> </ul>	Wang et al., 2019; Székely & Knirsch, 2005; Sue McGregor, 2005; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
Identify the type of consumer most common and the average type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.	10. Do you feel you have enough knowledge and are given enough information to avoid making unsustainable decisions?		Sue McGregor, 2005; DG SANCO, 2009; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.	11. Do you know the term "consumer educator"?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable education</li> <li>• Type of educated consumer</li> </ul>	Luchs et al. (2010); McGregor, 2005; DG SANCO, 2009; Brennan et al., 2016; DG SANCO, 2012; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001;
Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.	12. Do you think a fashion brand, like H&M is a good example of consumer educator?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable education</li> <li>• Type of educated consumer</li> <li>• Sustainable practices by brands</li> <li>• Brands' communication</li> </ul>	Joule, 2010 Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001; Luchs et al. (2010); McGregor, 2005; DG SANCO, 2009; Brennan et al., 2016; DG SANCO, 2012; Todeschini et al., 2017; Jeffries, 2013;

Table 3: Definition of categories for data analysis

In conclusion, the qualitative methodology of this study is centered on understanding how sustainable education can be implemented in fashion industry among the Gen Z consumers in Portugal, with a focus on integration of consumer education, Gen Z's perception of fashion brands and type of educated

consumer. By collecting knowledge through interviews with a Gen Z sample and analyzed through a thematic analysis. The next chapter focuses on the findings of these interviews.

## 4. FINDINGS

The current chapter serves the purpose of exposing the findings and emerging sub-categories, of the content analysis conducted to the content of the interviews made with the objective of understanding the Gen Z's perception on how sustainable education can be implemented onto the fashion industry. As previously mentioned, the researcher went through all the interviews and divided the content into categories and made an analysis of the behavior demonstrated on the behalf of the interviewees. From the analyzed data, the following five themes were identified:

- Sustainable education
- Consumer's perception of brands
- Sustainable practices by consumers
- Branding Sustainability
- Type of educated consumer

All the five themes are presented within the interviews but not on all of them at the same length, some are more notorious than others. In the next chapters, the content of the interviews will be explored across these topics and statements that prove its substances will be shown.



## 4.1.SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

The topic of Sustainable Education is very broad which makes for an alike variety in the opinions of the sample. However, there is a consensus on the lack of knowledge felt by consumers about sustainability and a need for more information from brands. There is an awareness about the state of environmental destruction made by society, as well as a realization of individual precautions as a preventive measure that are not done by the public. Instances of this topic can be found on Table 4:

E7	"I think that the knowledge that I have is not given by brands, nor by society."
E3	"The fact that I know some things about sustainability in the fashion world has nothing to do with the information that brands give me and it has nothing to do with the information in general."
E9	"The consumer still doesn't have enough information to understand if this (sustainability claims) is really true or is it just a way for the brand to improve its image for its consumers and thus increase sales."
E1	"... maybe it's up to these brands and entities of this (fashion) world, to explain what the most sustainable way is to do everything";
E6	"I don't think there will ever be a change, if the initiative to change doesn't come from each one of us."

Table 4: Statements on Sustainable education

## **4.2. CONSUMER'S PERCEPTION OF BRANDS' SUSTAINABILITY**

The topic of Consumers' perception of brands has also turned out with various opinions from the interviewees. The first and most common remark is that the claims done by major brands for greener productions are usually untruthful. This is due to the dimension of such companies and the money that is injected into them to work, their business model simply does not allow it. Once again, there is a need to highlight that companies have total control over their marketing, making sustainable claims and leading an uninformed consumer to believe they are making responsible choices. The main complaints from consumers are poor and non-environmentally friendly fabrics and poor working conditions for brand's manufactures.

The example of H&M rises opposite opinions, it is an obvious example of sustainability in the fast fashion industry but while most think it lacks funded claims, not only by still maintaining a mass production model but also by the some of the accusations made towards their poor conditions in production. Others think H&M makes good efforts towards sustainability and is a good example for other fast fashion brands to follow.

Lastly, there has been also some suggestions from the interviewees to what they think brands should do to improve their practices, such as reinventing their business model and producing fewer collections throughout the year.

Table 6 shows some parts of the interviews that emphasize this topic:

E1	<p>“Very big brands where there is a large turnover of money, I recognize that it (sustainable claims) may sometimes not be as linear as it seems. (...) because these big companies will always look for, for example, very cheap labor or decide on very cheap fabrics.”</p>
E2	<p>“Although the communication is now focused on sustainability brands do not insist on promoting less sales.”</p>
E3	<p>“Fast fashion brands try their best to make it seem like they have sustainable solutions, however I think this is all very superficial because they don't actually convey even 20% of the information you needed to have to be able to make informed choices.”</p> <p>“The big problem with H&amp;M is that if you go to search the company in dept, they have several problems in terms of sustainability, and it is all a façade. (...) they have people working in Bangladesh not even getting paid 2 EUR/hour.”</p>
E4	<p>“H&amp;M is already looking more towards these sustainable paths, and I think it does a good job of informing and educating consumers. (...) is an excellent example of a consumer educator mainly because we are talking about a brand that is a fast fashion brand and is increasingly moving towards sustainability and towards more sustainable methods.”</p>
E5	<p>“(H&amp;M) tries to draw people's attention to consume in a more sustainable and rational way and at the same time is a brand that offers these products.”</p>
E8	<p>“Fashion brands should reinvent their business model in general to adapt to what they promote, in other words, it is not enough to say that we have to be sustainable, it has to start from the brand by internally promote this sustainability.”</p> <p>“Fast fashion brands have collections with a very high turnover and instead of saying that they are going be sustainable they should make a compromise of only producing four collections a year, two for autumn/winter and two for spring/summer.”</p>

Table 5: Statements on Consumer’s perception of brands

### **4.3.SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES BY CONSUMERS**

When discussing sustainable practices by consumers, although they seem to not appreciate companies' practices, they also do not make much an effort themselves towards a more sustainable future. The sample was fairly balanced between female and male consumers and a difference was portrayed when questioning both genders about their consumption habits. Male consumers turned out to be much more sustainable due to their sporadic purchases only when in need of something new, they do not make this decision for sustainable purposes but rather for not wanting to purchase anything. Although there is a shift in more recent years towards responsible consumption, the female sample still shows a greater need for consuming fashion. The emerging trend of secondhand pieces has also been quite an ally towards this, with more vintage stores and even a curiosity to give relatives' old clothes a new life.

However, we still live in a very consumerist society that leads into the need of brands to keep up with trends and constantly launch new products. While it is not hard to make sustainable choices nowadays, many still choose to do it. Some interviewees even gave the example of looking at the tag of a piece of clothing and being able to see where it is made and the materials that are used, as to show how easy it can be. On the next table is some of the quotes from the talks with the chosen candidates:

E1	<p>"I don't have great clothes consumption habits; I don't usually go shopping a lot and I don't make a point of buying the most expensive or better brands."</p> <p>"I don't have any problems in using reusable second-hand things etc. I think my habits are sustainable, but I'm always open to know more to improve."</p> <p>"We can check any label of any brand of clothing and there it is usually the place where it is made and where it was manufactured."</p>
E2	<p>"What I try to do is not buying every season, not buying things that I won't use in a month, and I try to buy less and better."</p>
E3	<p>"The best solution is to buy second-hand, or I also operate a lot on the basis of hand-me downs normally from someone in my family who no longer uses them then I keep, reuse and sew them."</p>
E4	<p>"Unfortunately, we still live in a very consumerist society that doesn't think much about what they are buying (...) we already have a lot of information about this (sustainability) and I think that we are increasingly moving towards consuming better."</p>
E7	<p>"(...) more and more you buy things on impulse, you buy things you don't need, and the reality is that this doesn't go hand in hand with sustainability at all."</p>
E9	<p>"I consume in the best way for me and how I identify with the products, ending up not thinking so much about sustainability and the type of materials I use."</p>
E11	<p>"I'd rather pay more for a piece that lasts me 3/4 years than pay less for a piece that lasts a week and I must buy more and more. But of course, the general feeling of society is not that, but I've always consumed like that."</p>
E12	<p>"(...) consumers who are not informed or who do not pay much attention to this topic are buying from these same brands (fast fashion)."</p>

Table 6: Statements on Sustainable practices by consumers

#### **4.4. BRANDING SUSTAINABILITY**

This category discusses Branding Sustainability, to better explore the opinions of those interviewed on brands' communication towards green practices. Most of the subjects found that brands can be very deceitful when campaigning for their products, marketing sustainability as a tool to reach the target audience, as some mentioned when presented with the H&M ad displayed during the interview. However, they also confirmed that they still purchase these products due to lack of proof of deceitfulness, ending up choosing to believe brands.

Companies control of all their campaigns and ads and only show the better parts of their production, so it is quite difficult to know for sure what it what. The goal of a company is to profit, and it has become common practice for brands to only divulge what they find necessary to keep up with the sustainability "trend". Some consumers also made a point to note the small steps some major brands have made to better their ecological footprint, such as the group Inditex.

On the other hand, some consumers are of the opinion that recent brands have taken the need for sustainability to a whole other level by raising their prices with huge margins with the excuse of caring for the planet and their workers. The next table provides various comments made by the inquired sample on the subjects mentioned in this category:

E3	<p>"The market trend is to inform and influence to consume more, more, more, more, and more; the market says with micro trends: "consume and then nothing is in fashion anymore and throws everything away".</p> <p>"...it is very difficult to really filter what they (brands) say is sustainable and what is in fact sustainable"</p> <p>"I know what has been done in inditex stores, (...) accepting donations to reuse materials and the practice of reducing production."</p> <p>"I think it's very unfair because they (brands) are using the concern of some people with the environment and sustainability to profit with absolutely crazy margins. And these are usually the brands that have the most transparency that put their whole production process and where do their materials come from on their website."</p>
E4	<p>"The starting point is in the process of manufacturing materials (...) sometimes workers also live in precarious conditions, and this is not sustainable either."</p>
E6	<p>"We are bombarded with products all the time, every moment of our lives, even hidden marketing strategies that we didn't think were possible."</p>
E11	<p>"It's a bit ironic, for such a brand (H&amp;M) to talk about sustainability when their main objective is to sell pieces of clothing left and right. It's kind of hard to believe."</p> <p>"(...) you have more publicity about this is sustainable and no, this is sustainable because of this or that."</p>
E12	<p>"Some brands do (appeal towards sustainability), but only in the sense of appealing to consumer sentiment that they are "greener" and not because they are really sustainable."</p>
E7	<p>"They (H&amp;M) may even be opening the doors a bit in that sense, but they are never fully sustainable, that is, they cannot inform how an educator does, that is, try to give us examples for us to follow (...)"</p>

Table 7: Statements on Branding sustainability

#### **4.5. TYPE OF EDUCATED CONSUMER**

Lastly, this chapter revolves around the issue of Type of Educated Consumer which was developed in order to understand if sustainable education would be in fact effective in the Portuguese society. After exploring the results there is common understanding that while most consumers doubt the veracity of the pleas made by most brands, they inevitably succumb to purchasing their said “green” products and hoping that the promises they make are truthful. Although this mostly true, there is a growing number of consumers trying to educate themselves on the matter of sustainability to make more responsible purchases, such as E3.

Moreover, there is also a harmonious opinion that while social media and the internet have been great help in getting more information to make some better choices, consumers still believe that it is not enough to make them change their habits. The knowledge they have comes from an individual search and mere curiosity and not from brands or governmental entities with the intent of providing a better future.

Furthermore, most of the sample do not know what the concept of ethical production is and even worse, when asked what they understood by sustainability it thrown them off a bit and had to take a moment to fully answer. This reaction comes to show the lack of information that the public has on this matter.



One of the main aspects mentioned in the inquiries was the absence of curiosity that interviewees think that society has on knowing more on the topic of sustainability. They feel that most individuals are not worried about consuming more responsibly and trying to help the planet if it does come with advantages to them. Coupled with the powerful influence from social media to consume more, even if sometimes it promotes sustainability, it is uneven with the amount of product endorsement made. In table 7 it is present the various remarks made by the interviewees of this research:

E1	"I assume it's really pro-environment, I can't tell the difference and trust blindly, so I don't think about it too much."
E2	<p>"In my experience to really know if a brand is sustainable or not, I have to see the website read a lot about it and about circular production."</p> <p>"I have knowledge, yes, but I don't know to what extent I try to fully choose the sustainable option but I think that my level of knowledge maybe doesn't prevent my unsustainable purchases."</p>

<p>E3</p>	<p>“You learn this by yourself or just because you studied sustainability, there are a lot of people who don't know what ethical sustainable production is and for them it's a beautiful word, but they don't necessarily know what is unsustainable and what is not nor what is ethical or what is behind the mass production of clothing.”</p> <p>“The best solution is to buy second-hand, or I also operate a lot on the basis of hand-me downs normally from someone in my family who no longer uses them then I keep, reuse and sew them.”</p> <p>“The only way to avoid that (consumerism) is to go on a path of self-discovery so you can understand what your style is. But that goes through a careful analysis of what you use even in your closet and not buying things impulsively because it's super easy with the stimuli of stores nowadays.”</p> <p>“Mass consumption is not unavoidable it is not a necessity for life, not like water nor oxygen.”</p>
<p>E4</p>	<p>“I can see if a piece is sustainable or not, but I think the current market still isn't because brands and the government still don't give enough information to allow the average consumer to avoid unsustainable choices.”</p>
<p>E5</p>	<p>If they say they make a collection of clothes with recyclable materials and then put them up for sale, I think this is proof that they are fulfilling what they promised but now whether it is really true or not, I don't know.”</p>

E7	“I never go and see if the materials and how the piece is made to see if it's really sustainable. I think people really believe in what brands tell them.”
E8	“I'm the one who looks for it, I don't feel that a person who doesn't want to know and who just believes the information they receive is educated enough. You need to want to look for it.”
E9	“I think that with globalization in general, and the emergence of social networks, it has been increasingly proven that the consumer is completely influenced by behavior and the mass.”

Table 8: Statements on Type of educated consumer

This chapter reported all the important aspects mentioned on the interviews made to the Gen Z sample chosen and their respective comments on the matters. On the next stage there will be an analysis of this content in correlation with the literature review made in the chapter one.

## **5.DISCUSSION**

The findings previously presented suggested that Gen Z is showing a growing concern towards sustainability and awareness for brands' sustainable claims, but still the overall sample still showed lack of education of environmentally friendly consumerism.

After having introduced and analyzed the methodology applied to this work, as well as the findings, this chapter addresses the emergent themes discovered, critically relating them to the literature review offered when appropriate. Therefore, structurally speaking this chapter is divided into five sections with each of the topics mentioned in the previous stage. The first chapter has a wider view of the topic of sustainable education, while the next three focus on understanding the sustainability aspects on both sides of consumers and brands, and lastly it comes the chapter of identifying the type of consumer present in Gen Z's Portuguese market.

### **5.1.SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION**

When discussed on the interviews, the matter of Sustainable Education made for a consensus on the need of more knowledge on sustainability from brands or governmental entities, which comes from the high demand for a better society towards a more sustainable future. The 2015 Paris Agreement, made for the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainability Development,

meant that governments, businesses, and consumers had to take on a responsible use of natural resources due to the limited carbon dioxide emissions (Stöckigt et al., 2018). There has been a change in companies to implement a corporate social responsibility into their businesses, but this has not made an impression on consumers.

When given information by their preferred brands, consumers show influenced attitudes towards the brand and their products (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Bolton and Mattila, 2015). To give a customer information is to emphasize the responsibility they have on the sustainable development of our society (Buerkle et al., 2016), by engaging in more sustainable lifestyles, whether these are: environmental protection, social or economic development. As Luchs et al. (2010) showed companies promoting sustainable products should also associate them with a strength branding, and with promotional techniques and product positioning to better reach their consumers. All these efforts contribute to the path of brands as consumer educators which translates into providing an educational environment in which consumers may develop their moral character, civic competency, and constructive cooperation (McGregor, 2005). By doing so brands can give consumers the personal autonomy and critical conscience to develop as an active and efficient citizen in consumer issues.

A need for environmental awareness from the Gen Z sample of this study is clear and came with the notion that individual precautions make for a great

step towards it. The way to affect consumers' awareness for this issue is evidently through educating them with the facts and influence them with the brands they admire, "There is no change without learning, and no learning without change" (Sterling, p.1, 2021). When given the independence of consumer knowledge, we can make better choices for sustainability, ethical, and personal finance purposes (DG SANCO, 2009). This all while educating an empowered consumer with access to information on the market and its competition (McGregor, 2005).

## **5.2. CONSUMER'S PERCEPTION OF BRANDS**

This chapter aims to explore the results of the findings in Consumer's perception of brands by connecting them with the previous research showed on the literature review. The main argument presented in the findings was the issue of Gen Z consumers having a hard time believing the claims done by major fashion brands for sustainable practices. This can be since fast fashion has had a significant impact on the degradation of the environmental and social behavior (Todeschini et al., 2017), with textiles and footwear being ranked fourth on the list of industries' impact on the environment (European Environmental Agency, 2014).

Along with that argument came the opinion that such companies cannot fulfil their promises on sustainability considering their business models, and

that sustainable business models should be adopted. Corporations that aim towards sustainability need to educate themselves about their consumer's preferences to know what socially and environmentally friendly attributes to implement in their value proposition that are going to cause desire. Sustainable business models are an extension of the business model (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018), but with a strong focus on what the business model lacks, the social and environmental implications of running a firm (Joyce and Paquin, 2016; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008). The need for sustainability in business comes from understanding of how to create a meaningful positive impact in areas that are important to the society and the planet, also called Business Sustainability 3.0 by Vynogradova (2021).

When companies implement corporate social responsibilities (CSR), what means that they use business techniques to try to bear responsibility for their impact on climate change or society. These CSRs bring on a better offer of sustainable products, but these can also be a mere allegation (Stöckigt et al., 2018), like the sample suggested. Declaring corporate sustainability implies that all parts of the company's performance, from employee behavior to value chain conduct (Fiksel, McDaniel, & Mendenhall, 1999), are sustainable (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). As said by subjects of the interviews, untruthful conducts by brands can lead uninformed consumers to believe they are making responsible choices, seeing that generally, the decision of repurchasing revolves around their perception of quality, price, and fissionability (Wang et al., 2019).

Finally, when discussing the example of H&M the opinions among the results of the inquiries varied, some believe the brand to be a source of misconduct among sustainability, and others think it to be a good example of what fast fashion should adopt. Furthermore, both assessments have their funded basis, with H&M being among some of the biggest fashion brands to have shown concern by deciding to reduce their use of plastic, reduce pollution, and care more about the environment (Vynogradova et al., 2021). Consequently, in 2017, H&M had some allegations made against them claiming that the company had burnt 12 tones of unsold, but usable clothes, as well as destroying discarded clothing with recycled wood and trash in the city of Västerås, as part of a project to help a Swedish power plant to convert oil and coal- fired generation into fossil fuel-free facility by 2020 (Farmbrough, 2018), this comes to prove the concerns that some of the sample issued towards the brand's actions.

### **5.3.SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES BY CONSUMERS**

According to findings on Sustainable practices by consumers, although there is an effort towards making companies responsible for their sustainability claims there is an inconsistency in the actions made by consumers. All of this can be related with the fast rise of fast fashion and the increasing overconsumption established in our society (Todeschini et al., 2017), all related



to the fast pace of the fashion world combined with the creation of habits based on quick acquisition and disposal of mass-produced products.

The demand that society, as showed in the interviews, puts on to create a better and greener world that leads towards sustainable consumption is not balanced with their testimonies on their own habits, this leads to a lack alignment of approaches from both consumers and brands. Individuals are not separated from their actions and the world, every choice they make as consumers has an impact on the environment (Orr, 2001 cited by Sterling, 2013).

#### **5.4. BRANDING SUSTAINABILITY**

On the category of Branding Sustainability, findings were unanimous reporting a notorious sense of duplicity from brands concerning sustainable practices, declaring that besides continuously purchasing from certain brands, the interviewed sample has a hard time accepting their claims as candid. Brands have successively turned to renewable or sustainable materials for the development of products as well as constantly changing their marketing strategy to convey a message of development of sustainable fashion (Vynogradova et al., 2021). The business environment is rapidly changing into one in which sustainability is central to profitability and the capacity to evolve with the market and consistently generate value for consumers. In summary,

sustainability is becoming the new cost of entry into the mass market (Joule, 2010).

Then, there was also a common judgement from the subjects that brands tend to share only what seems convenient to their image, which makes sense when aligned with the fact that the fashion industry only recycles about 20% of clothing with enormous amounts of goods being incinerated or thrown in landfills (Global Footprint Network, 2017 cited by Pal & Gander, 2018). Linear economy is one of the major environmental difficulties in the business, and the problems are not only focused on the end of a product's life cycle, but also throughout the manufacturing process. The amount of water necessary to cultivate and process enough cotton to make a basic t-shirt is around 600 liters (Turley, 2009).

Subsequently, with regards to sustainable operations companies need to integrate goals, policies, ideologies, and action plans that share a common “worldview” (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008) connecting with economic, ecological, and social sustainability (Savitz & Weber, 2006) to be able to pass on to their consumers a credible green image. Some actions made by major brands have not gone unnoticed by consumers, with individuals interviewed stating that companies, such as Inditex, have made appreciable changes to their practices in recent years. To improve fast fashion's perception of low-priced, low-quality, frequently replaced, and wasteful fashion products with short life cycles

(Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011), environmental management practices, recyclable products, and reduced packaging waste are especially needed (Wong, Lai, Shang, Lu, & Leung, 2012).

## **5.5. TYPE OF EDUCATED CONSUMER**

In the matter of type of educated consumer, the findings of this study have found while most Gen Z consumers suspect that brands are not the most truthful sources about their products, when purchasing green products, they choose to believe the claims on lack of knowledge. If a consumer were to be able to distinct such claims they would have to be educated on the subject and with that expertise know how to critically evaluate allegations and not trust those with unreliable sources (Park and Kim, 2016). A less educated consumer will most likely not be affected by such sustainability claims because they blindly believe brands' communication and are regular buyers (Park and Kim, 2016). A study by Kumar et al. (2017) shows the effect of environmental knowledge on purchase intention for sustainable products, and Paul et al. (2016) concluded that consumers who have a positive attitude toward sustainability and environmental concern are more likely to make efforts to reduce their impacts. Consequently, in order for companies to contribute towards sustainability there have to be decisions made between subjective costs and benefits (Stöckigt et al., 2018), the outcome comes from the influence of the situation and the attributes of the consumer in question.

Moreover, except for those who have the ability to critically analyze and think about the repercussions of their individual acts upon the environment, most do not understand the magnitude of the consequences and choices that must be made to create a better future for ourselves and our planet (Orr, 2001 cited by Sterling, 2013). The findings showed that even though the social media and the overall internet helped bring a lot of knowledge to society, it is still not enough to change their habits of consumption.

Furthermore, interviewees testified that the knowledge that they do possess comes from individual search and curiosity, not from any brand or entity. The capacity to create a viable future for the next generations rests upon whether we can nurture unprecedented levels of learning and for that, the educational system has a fundamental role (Sterling, 2001).

Lastly, comes the conclusion of the analysis of what types of educated consumers are present in the Gen Z's Portuguese population to better understand what educational program would be most effective. The sample showed various positive and negative sides to which make for the conclusion of a majority of Type 1: Consumer Information, Protection and Advocacy (Sandlin, 2004; Flowers, 2001 cited by McGregor, 2005). With an opinionated view on what brands are doing wrong concerning sustainability but ultimately continuously purchasing from said brands, an increasingly curiosity towards learning more on the green practices but a common assessment that most of society lacks

curiosity about sustainability due to a lack of personal benefits. This kind of individual believes consumerism to be a natural and good due to consumer culture being a key role in the economy (McGregor, 2005), with a mindset of success is equal to money and prestige. The goal with this type of education suggested is to teach society about their rights, and in less extent, responsibilities, while also giving them technical skills that will help them avoid untrustworthy claims. There was also a presence of Type 3: Critical Approach for Self-interest, which makes for an ethical consumer or green consumer that is able to recognize the power of consumption. This is someone that does accept consumerism as natural and strives to interrupting it making others aware of how persuasive it really is in their lives. Although this type was only showed on one subject, E3, it made an impact to know that Gen Z is not all lost to consumerism. The interviewee E3 made her point very clear by declaring she makes efforts to explore other options such as secondhand items and hand me downs as well as incentivizing others to go on a search of self-discovering for their style so to not consume mindlessly. Furthermore, E3 gave a perspective on sustainable fashion brands and how they use sustainability as an excuse to make bigger profit and explore those who care for environmental causes when purchasing clothing.

To conclude, no other types of educated consumer were found within the ones suggested by McGregor (2005) nor Sandlin (2004) and Flowers (2001). Which translates to a lack of consumer empowerment in the Gen Z Portuguese consumers that comes to show the need for consumer education in the fashion

industry and in general. The next chapter concentrates on the conclusions of this research throughout the whole process of writing it.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter begins by presenting the current study's final conclusions in the form of objective replies to the established research objectives, as well as a concluding perspective on the study's findings. The work's theoretical and practical contributions are then presented. Finally, the study's shortcomings and potential future research directions are discussed.

### 6.1. CLOSING REMARKS

To better understand how sustainable education can be implemented in fashion industry among the Gen Z consumers in Portugal was the main objective of this study. To tackle this objective, research was made on different studies on sustainability, fashion industry and consumer education, as well as interviews done on a Gen Z sample, all the work assumed a dissertation design. The following specific objectives were specified:

- Analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model.
- Assess Gen Z's perception on Fashion brands, their practices, and actions towards sustainable education.
- Identify the type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market.

Through a content analysis of the substance of the interviews, five categories were defined referring to consumer education in fashion, which were then identified, analyzed, and discussed.

On the first specific objective which was to analyze the different ways that the fashion industry can integrate sustainable education into their business model. The conclusions taken were the need for transparency from brands, for them to explain to consumers the impact their purchases have on the environment, to emphasize the urgency for individual changes towards a more sustainable lifestyle and the promotion of less consumption.

The second specific objective consisted of assessing Gen Z's perception on Sustainable Fashion brands, their practices, and actions, for the outcome found subsisted of the opinion that brands are deceitful about their operations, looking for cheaper fabrics and manufacture, leading to not informing the consumer about making responsible choices. Consumers also made the point to say that brands bombard the public with new products all the time, wanting them to consume consistently.

Consequently, the third specific objective search to identify the type of educated consumer in the Portuguese market, which by the results of this research consists of an uninformed individual that affirms that society is not looking to change their consumption habits unless it directly benefits them. The Gen Z Portuguese consumer is someone that suspects of wrongful conduct by brands but does nothing about it nor stops buying from them. Concluding on the presence of a Type 1 consumer in majority of society and some proof of Type 3 also being present, according to McGregor (2005).



Lastly, to fulfill the main objective of this study, better understand how sustainable education can be implemented in fashion industry among Gen Z consumers in Portugal, brands must put into practice the findings of this research. With that said, this means a commitment to full transparency not only in their production as well as their communications, and a constant promotion of sustainable habits for individual change instead of the usual consistent advertisement of new products. Another practice that must be implemented by brands is efforts to make consumers believe this new venture of transparency as well as research to find what benefits each brand can give consumers to incentivize Gen Z to start committing to sustainability.

## **6.2. CONTRIBUTIONS**

Before this study, no research had explored the implementation of consumer education in the fashion industry for the Gen Z Portuguese market. This section demonstrates how the current study's theoretical and practical contributions to enhance understanding in the field of social marketing by investigating how the fashion industry might utilize their strengths to address structural concerns in society.

Concerning theoretical contributions, this study showed that most Gen Z consumers have little knowledge regarding sustainability and green practices and the poor insight they do have comes from individual research or information passed on by social media influencers. There has also been registered a strong opinion by the Gen Z sample of a vast absence of curiosity

from most of the consuming society which comes from the recurring trend demonstrated by individuals of not pursuing any commitment unless it comes with added value. Additionally, besides the positive information that can be found on social media and the internet in general for the growth of sustainable knowledge among consumers, research also reveals a growing concern for the negative impact that social media brings to consumerism with regular advertisement of new products whether this comes from influencers or even ads that seem to keep on thriving on every platform.

On the other hand, regarding practical contributions for brands, a few takeaways were identified in the research. First, companies need to show more about their production process, the study shows that consumers are looking for more transparency from companies in matter of communication. Brands should also start to educate their consumers on the impact that each purchase has on the environment by showing current data on the environmental impact of their materials, production, and distribution. Then, brands should also work more on the durability of products by investing in better quality materials and research towards it, as well as promoting it for consumers to buy less quantities of cheaper products that will not make for responsible purchases and instead invest on quality items that last much longer. Also, the advice that could be given to fast fashion brands formulated by the findings of this study, is to do collections of their best seller but resorting to recyclable materials, this would show their consumers that sustainability does not have to be a

compromise to design and wearability. Additional to this, fast fashion brands should also reconsider the amount of products launched per season, it could be reduced to one larger collection per season instead of several ones.

### **6.3.LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although this master thesis is finished, it can inspire future research about consumer education in the fashion industry. For this reason, it is crucial to outline the possible ways to conduct such studies.

It would be relevant to pursue a quantitative study on the subject with a broader sample, to understand the dimension of the issue with a wider spectrum. A case study regarding H&M could also be beneficial, seeing the diversity of judgements made during study when using the brand as an example, this could lead to a more in-depth view within the practices of the fast fashion brand.

A suggestion to analyze the case of the brand Levis Strauss & Co. should also be made seeing that it was mentioned to be a great example of a sustainable fashion brand and exploring their practices could be advantageous to aid other companies.

Another suggestion is further research among the fashion industry to explore the benefits that can be given to consumers when faced with sustainable choices, this will contribute to those brands that implement sustainable education and wish for their consumers to pursue it.

Finally, some considerations must be made concerning the limitations of this study. Considering qualitative studies there is beneficial aspects to achieving more thorough results, however some of its shortcomings must be addressed. Firstly, the issue of shortage of time to conduct the research, this study was made in a mere nine months due to limitations established at the beginning of the process which made for a less profound analysis. Then, the issue of diversity of the sample which was not as considerate as it could be due to low participation rates in the interviews despite a high number of responses to the online questionnaire made.

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