

Fashion Creativity, Regenerative Practices and Visual Communication: An Exploratory Research

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Generation Z's perception of and engagement with sustainable fashion, vintage consumption, and upcycling practices, with the aim of understanding the factors that contribute to the persistence of conformity-driven consumption patterns despite growing environmental awareness. The research explores the gap between declared sustainable values and actual purchasing behavior, examining how circular fashion can be reframed as a tool for identity construction, responsibility, and creative self-expression. The study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach based on an online questionnaire administered to 100 university students aged 18 to 30. The survey combines closed- and open-ended questions addressing purchasing habits, knowledge of sustainable fashion and upcycling, perceived value of vintage garments, barriers to regenerative practices, and willingness to engage in reuse-based solutions. Data were analyzed in aggregated form to identify recurring patterns, critical issues, and opportunities for design intervention. Findings indicate increasing environmental sensitivity among respondents; however, sustainability remains marginal in everyday purchasing decisions, revealing a persistent attitude–behavior gap. Price, aesthetics, and convenience continue to dominate consumption choices. Results also highlight the importance of digital visual communication and participatory tools in enhancing trust, transparency, and engagement. Despite limitations related to sample size and disciplinary concentration, the study offers relevant exploratory insights. Its originality lies in integrating theoretical analysis, empirical research, and the proposal of an interactive digital platform that enables users to actively participate in garment regeneration, transforming sustainability into an experiential, educational, and co-creative process.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion, Upcycling, Creativity, Visual communication

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, the global fashion system has been dominated by a linear production and consumption model based on rapid manufacturing cycles, accelerated consumption, and short product lifespans. This model, strongly associated with fast fashion, has generated significant environmental and social impacts, including excessive water consumption, high CO₂

emissions, textile waste accumulation, and labor exploitation (Fletcher, 2014; Niinimäki et al., 2020). From a human factors perspective, the linear model also affects consumer behavior by encouraging impulsive purchasing, low product attachment, and reduced awareness of product value and lifecycle (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017), every second the equivalent of one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or incinerated worldwide, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change. In response, design research and human-centered disciplines increasingly focus on alternative paradigms that consider users not merely as end-consumers, but as active participants within complex socio-technical systems (Mang & Reed, 2012; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). The aim of my work is to analyse the perception and interest of Generation Z towards sustainable fashion, vintage, and upcycling, identifying the motivations that lead young people to prefer conformity over standing out through circular fashion (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The project aims to raise awareness among Gen Z about the serious environmental and social consequences of fast fashion, promoting a vision of fashion as a tool for expression, responsibility, and change (Joy et al., 2012). We examined prior literature to identify the main cognitive, social, and experiential barriers affecting sustainable behavior in young consumers (Tham, 2008; Tan et al., 2023). The research results will form the basis for developing a collection and an e-commerce platform based on regenerative practices (Pizzetti et al., 2021). The originality of the work lies in the integration of theoretical research, design experimentation, and digital interaction. The project stands out for proposing an interactive platform that allows users to upload unused garments and select a modification slot: professionals and designers will suggest various restyling and regeneration options, enhancing both pre-consumer and post-consumer materials (McDonough & Braungart, 2002; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This idea combines participation, education, and creativity, encouraging people to give new life to garments and to understand the true value of recycling (Fletcher, 2014). Thus, the project translates sustainability into an active experience, turning the consumer into the protagonist of change and fashion into an ethical and contemporary language (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regenerative Practices, Circular and Human-Centered Design

Sustainable fashion is commonly defined as an approach that integrates environmental protection, social equity, and economic viability throughout the fashion supply chain (Mang & Reed, 2012). However, recent research emphasizes the transition from sustainability toward regenerative practices, which aim not only to minimize harm but to actively restore environmental and social systems (Mang & Reed, 2012). Within this framework, circular economy strategies such as vintage consumption, second-hand markets, and upcycling emerge as key regenerative practices (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). Upcycling, in particular, involves the creative transformation of pre-consumer and post-consumer materials into new products with enhanced functional,

aesthetic, and symbolic value (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). From an AHFE standpoint, upcycling represents a design-driven intervention that directly influences user perception, emotional engagement, and product attachment, fostering longer product lifecycles and more responsible consumption behaviors (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). Creativity plays a central role in this process (Bassano and Piciocchi, 2021): by transforming waste into unique artifacts, designers challenge standardization and promote individuality, personalization, and narrative-driven value (Crane, 2012). These elements are crucial in shaping positive user experiences and reinforcing sustainable decision-making (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

Visual Communication and User Perception of Sustainability

Visual communication plays a central role in shaping contemporary understandings of sustainability in fashion; however, its function cannot be assumed to be inherently transparent or progressive (Tham, 2008; Tan et al., 2023). While images, digital storytelling, and interactive platforms are widely employed to render complex issues such as environmental impact, materials, and production processes more accessible, they also risk transforming sustainability into a primarily symbolic and aesthetic construct (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this sense, visual communication does not merely translate sustainability; it actively produces its meaning, boundaries, and perceived credibility (Cao et al., 2013). Recent research has shown that visual strategies can influence pro-environmental attitudes and foster engagement (Tan et al., 2023). Yet, the persuasive effectiveness of such strategies often exceeds the depth of the environmental commitments they claim to represent (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Within the fashion industry, this dynamic is particularly evident: abstract visual codes natural color palettes, organic textures, minimalist aesthetics, and symbolic references to nature are widely adopted across brands whose production models remain anchored in overproduction, resource extraction, and global inequalities (Fletcher, 2014; Joy et al., 2012). Visual tools such as infographics, animations, and data-driven storytelling are often praised for reducing cognitive complexity and improving comprehension (Cao et al., 2013). However, this simplification can simultaneously depoliticize sustainability by framing it as an individual moral choice rather than a systemic issue embedded in economic, social, and regulatory structures (Fletcher, 2014). As a result, responsibility is subtly shifted from institutions to consumers, reinforcing a model of ethical consumption that leaves dominant production paradigms largely unchallenged (Ajzen, 2020). Moreover, access to sustainable fashion narratives and to the products they promote remains uneven (Bourdieu, 1984). Sustainable fashion communication frequently addresses audiences endowed with higher cultural, digital, and economic capital, contributing to the construction of sustainability as a form of symbolic distinction rather than an inclusive practice (Joy et al., 2012). In this configuration, sustainability risks functioning as a performative marker of commitment, while remaining materially inaccessible to large segments of the population (Fletcher, 2014). At the same time, dismissing visual and digital narratives

altogether would overlook their structural relevance within contemporary modes of engagement (Tan et al., 2023). For digitally native generations, particularly Generation Z, sustainability is increasingly encountered through storytelling, participation, and digital experience rather than through the material product alone (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Precisely because narration constitutes a primary interface through which sustainability becomes visible, intelligible, and emotionally resonant, visual communication emerges as a critical site of responsibility (Tan et al., 2023; McKnight et al., 2002). Its ethical and political legitimacy depends not on its persuasive power, but on the degree to which narrative intensity corresponds to verifiable environmental practices (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). When supported by substantive transformation, visual communication can function as a necessary mediator between knowledge and action; when detached from it, it risks reinforcing sustainability as an elitist, aestheticized, and ultimately insufficient response to systemic environmental challenges (Fletcher, 2014).

Generation Z, Sustainable Fashion and Human-Centered Consumption

Generation Z represents a key demographic group in the transition toward more sustainable and regenerative fashion systems (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Born into a global context characterized by climate change, environmental crises, economic instability, and rapid digitalization, this generation has developed a heightened sensitivity toward ethical, environmental, and social issues (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Sustainability is not perceived solely as an environmental concern, but as a value intertwined with identity, lifestyle, and self-expression (Joy et al., 2012). From a human-centered perspective, Gen Z's relationship with fashion is deeply mediated by digital platforms and visual cultures (Tan et al., 2023). Social media, influencers, and online communities shape perceptions of value, desirability, and legitimacy, reinforcing the importance of transparency and authenticity in sustainable fashion communication (Banet-Weiser, 2012). However, while sustainability is widely embraced at a declarative level, its translation into everyday consumption practices remains complex and fragmented (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Despite strong pro-environmental attitudes, several studies highlight a persistent attitude-behavior gap in Generation Z's fashion consumption (Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Young consumers often express concern for sustainability but continue to purchase fast fashion products due to factors such as affordability, convenience, trend accessibility, and habitual consumption patterns (Joy et al., 2012). From a human factors and ergonomics perspective, this gap can be interpreted as the result of system-level inefficiencies rather than individual inconsistencies (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). Limited usability of sustainable alternatives, lack of clear information, and perceived effort associated with ethical choices increase cognitive and practical barriers (McKnight et al., 2002). Consequently, sustainable behavior requires supportive infrastructures

and user-centered solutions capable of aligning ethical intentions with accessible, rewarding experiences (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

Vintage and Upcycling as Identity and Meaning-Making Practices

Within Generation Z, fashion plays a crucial role as a tool for identity construction and symbolic communication (Crane, 2012). Vintage and upcycled garments offer alternatives to standardized fashion by providing uniqueness, narrative depth, and emotional resonance (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). Wearing regenerated clothing becomes a form of value signaling, allowing users to express creativity, environmental awareness, and resistance to mass-produced aesthetics (Crane, 2012; Fletcher, 2014). Upcycling, in particular, transforms discarded materials into meaningful artifacts through creative intervention (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). This process enhances perceived product value and emotional attachment, key factors in extending product lifecycles (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). However, the perceived aesthetic uncertainty and limited knowledge of upcycling processes continue to hinder widespread adoption, indicating the need for clearer communication and guided user experiences (Joy et al., 2012; Pizzetti et al., 2021).

Digital Experience, Participation and Trust

For a digitally native generation, engagement with sustainable fashion no longer derives exclusively from the availability of eco-friendly products, but is strongly influenced by the quality of the digital experience associated with the brand (Tan et al., 2023). In this context, interactive platforms, visual storytelling, and active participation models foster not only a deeper understanding of sustainable values and stronger emotional involvement, but also the construction of cognitive trust, a central element in cognitive ergonomics applied to the human-centered design of digital systems (McKnight et al., 2002). Several case studies within the fashion sector demonstrate how digital experiences can strengthen engagement and a sense of belonging while simultaneously reducing environmental impact (Amed & D'Auria, 2025). Tribute Brand represents a paradigmatic example of this approach, offering digital collections wearable through augmented reality or avatars in metaverse environments, allowing users to experience garments in an immersive and shareable way without material resource consumption (Arango et al., 2023). Similarly, the adoption of technologies such as NFC and Digital Product IDs by brands and projects including Paolina Russo, The R Collective, and Gabriela Hearst has enabled transparent and accessible narratives of production processes, materials, and the environmental impact of garments, thereby reinforcing user trust and perceptions of brand authenticity (Pizzetti et al., 2021). Phygital experiences and activations based on virtual and augmented reality developed by several luxury brands further demonstrate how the integration of physical and digital dimensions can enhance emotional connections with brands, particularly among younger consumers who are attentive to technological innovation and transparency

(Tan et al., 2023). Analysis of academic literature and empirical data highlights that certain types of digital initiatives are particularly effective in fostering trust and engagement (McKnight et al., 2002; Pizzetti et al., 2021). Transparent storytelling based on verifiable data and clear visual content helps reduce the perceptual uncertainty typical of the sustainable fashion ecosystem, increasing perceived credibility (Tan et al., 2023). At the same time, social media interaction through both brand-generated and user-generated content strengthens the sense of community and can positively influence purchase intention through heightened emotional and social engagement (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The role of influencers is also significant when they are perceived as authentic and aligned with sustainability values, as they help reduce skepticism and reinforce trust in the initiatives promoted (Arango et al., 2023). Finally, digital co-creation processes such as 3D configurators, virtual customization, and AR fitting enhance users' sense of control and identification with the product, fostering deeper and more sustained engagement (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Numerous studies indicate a clear relationship between perceived trust, engagement, and final purchasing behavior (McKnight et al., 2002). Informational transparency and access to clear data reduce perceived risk and support more informed decision-making processes (Ajzen, 2020). Emotional and participatory engagement strengthens the relationship with the brand and may translate into greater loyalty and repeat purchasing, while the presence of an active digital community and social proof mechanisms helps reduce psychological distance between users and brands (Pizzetti et al., 2021). These factors are particularly significant for Generation Z consumers, who attribute equal, if not greater, value to digital experiences compared to the product itself (Tan et al., 2023; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Integrating successful digital use cases within the sustainable fashion sector, such as augmented reality experiences, Digital Product IDs, and participatory engagement models, enables a deeper understanding of how digital experience, transparency, and involvement can generate higher perceived value (Amed & D'Auria, 2025; Arango et al., 2023). This value contributes to the construction of cognitive trust, amplifies emotional and social engagement, and increases the likelihood that interest in sustainability will translate into conscious purchasing behaviors, particularly when digital interfaces are designed according to human-centered principles and oriented toward clarity, usability, and participation (McKnight et al., 2002; Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach aimed at understanding Generation Z's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding sustainable fashion, upcycling, and the role of digital visual communication (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). The research instrument was an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms, structured with both closed- and open-ended questions to investigate participants' knowledge of sustainable fashion and upcycling, purchasing habits, the weight of sustainability in their consumption choices, the perception of vintage and regenerated garments,

barriers to adopting upcycling practices, the influence of digital visual communication on trust, and interest in a garment regeneration platform based on active user participation (Tan et al., 2023; McKnight et al., 2002). The sample consists mainly of young adults aged 18 to 30, with a significant representation of students and professionals working in fashion design, design, communication, and creative disciplines (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). This methodological choice aligns with the exploratory aim of the study, targeting individuals directly involved in creative processes and the future scenarios of sustainable fashion (Fletcher, 2014). The collected data were analyzed in an aggregated and interpretive manner to identify recurring patterns, critical issues, and design opportunities (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). The analysis provides indications for developing a digital platform that integrates regenerative practices and human-centered design principles, promoting user interaction and active participation as mechanisms to encourage sustainable and conscious behaviors (Pizzetti et al., 2021).

RESEARCH RESULTS (DISCUSSION)

The aim of the research is to analyze if and how Generation Z, despite expressing interest in sustainability, faces cognitive, cultural, and experiential barriers in translating these values into concrete behaviors (Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki et al., 2020), and to evaluate the potential of a participatory digital platform based on upcycling (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Pizzetti et al., 2021).

The results show that Generation Z has a declared awareness of sustainable fashion, but their knowledge is generally partial and fragmented (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Sustainability is mainly associated with reducing environmental impact, while social, ethical, and supply chain aspects are marginal (Fletcher, 2014; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Behaviorally, the attitude–behavior gap is evident: although many respondents express interest in sustainability, it has little influence on daily purchasing decisions (Joy et al., 2012; Ajzen, 2020). Nonetheless, willingness to pay more for clearly valuable products indicates that the issue lies not in interest but in the lack of interpretative tools and trust (McKnight et al., 2002). Upcycling is generally known but primarily perceived as a functional recovery practice rather than a creative, identity-driven, and aesthetic process (McDonough & Braungart, 2002; Crane, 2012). The widespread presence of unused garments in wardrobes signals strong latent potential for regeneration practices (EllenS MacArthur Foundation, 2017). A key finding is the role of visual communication and digital experience: images, videos, storytelling, and realistic previews are crucial for trust in a sustainable platform (Tan et al., 2023; McKnight et al., 2002). The most requested functionalities (previews, 3D models, guided support, personalization) indicate that sustainability becomes actionable only when experiential, understandable, and interactive (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Pizzetti et al., 2021). Overall, the findings confirm that a digital upcycling platform can function as a cognitive and behavioral device, capable of reducing the attitude–behavior gap through participation, transparency,

and co-creation (Ajzen, 2020; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), as showed in the following table.

Table 1: Overview of the questionnaire findings on Generation Z's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to sustainable fashion, vintage, and upcycling, with corresponding interpretations and implications for the research objectives.

Theme / Question	Main Results	Interpretation / What Emerges	Link to Research Objective
Age	18–20: 39,2% 21–23: 35,3%	Most respondents are aged 18–23 → young target, part of Gen Z.	Indicates Gen Z perceptions and attitudes toward sustainable fashion
Gender	Female: 76,7% Male: 23,3%	Predominantly female; aligns with known trends in sustainable fashion sensitivity.	Contextualizes responses regarding consumption and perception of sustainability.
Field of study/work	Fashion Design: 53% Design/Art: 14% Other creative and communication fields	Sample mainly creative → potentially good knowledge of sustainability and upcycling.	Allows analysis of perceptions of young creatives, main target for the application.
Knowledge of sustainable fashion	Very: 31,3% Fairly: 60,2%	Most have moderate knowledge; few report in-depth understanding.	Highlights gap between general awareness and detailed competence, central research objective.
Associations with sustainable fashion	Environmental impact reduction: 55,7% Eco-friendly materials: 21% Recycling/reuse: 17,6% Brand transparency: 4%	Sustainability is mainly perceived as environmental → low awareness of social and ethical aspects.	Emphasizes the need for integrated education in the application.
Influence of sustainability on purchases	Little: 51,1% Fairly: 34,7% Not at all: 9,7% Very: 4,5%	Sustainability has little influence on actual purchasing → confirms attitude–behavior gap.	Supports the aim of designing the application to bridge this gap.
Knowledge of upcycling	Yes: 55,7% No: 22,2% Heard of it: 22,2%	About half know the term; some confusion remains.	Confirms the need for education and storytelling within the platform.
Associations with upcycling	Garment recovery: 53% Don't know: 18% Sustainability: 11,4% Creativity: 10% Uniqueness: 8%	Focus is on functional recovery, less on creativity and uniqueness.	Highlights the educational role of the platform: communicate the creative and identity aspects of upcycling.

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued.

Theme / Question	Main Results	Interpretation / What Emerges	Link to Research Objective
Use of vintage/ secondhand garments	Often: 35,8% Sometimes: 43,2% Rarely: 14,8% Never: 6,3%	Majority have experience with regenerated garments → potentially receptive market.	Relevant for designing app features focused on upcycling and vintage.
Main obstacles to upcycled purchases	Prejudices: 27,3% Hard to find: 21,6% Unattractive aesthetics:15,9% Limited info: 12,5% Price: 11,9% None: 10,8%	Perceived social, aesthetic, and informational barriers → the app should overcome these obstacles.	Guides visualization and communication functionalities of the application.
Unused garments in wardrobe	+10: 31% 6-10: 35% 1-5: 28,5%	High presence of unused garments → concrete potential for upcycling.	Reinforces the relevance of the app as a regeneration tool.
Content that makes a sustainable brand credible	Clear data/info: 37% Storytelling process:31,3% Real testimonials:21%	Transparency and narrative are key → integrate into the application.	Emphasizes importance of visual storytelling and traceability in the platform.
Reasons to use an upcycling platform	Give new life to garments: 63% Reduce waste: 16% Unique item: 14%	Main need is functional and emotional → make the regeneration process unique and useful.	Confirms the objective of making users protagonists and motivated.
Influence of visual communication on trust	Very: 41% Fairly: 38% Extremely: 15%	Trust increases with images, videos, digital storytelling → confirms importance of UX/UI.	Supports design of 3D previews, renderings, step-by-step guides.
Most useful app features	Preview result: 25% 3D model: 17,6% Guided support: 16% Decorations/ embroidery: 11%	Users want interactivity, personalization, and realistic visualization.	Guides functional development of the application.
Factors encouraging sustainable use	Testimonials results: 31% Final visualization:26% Clarity: 17% Direct contact with designer: 14%	Trust and transparency increase adoption → platform should make process and results visible.	Reinforces principle of active participation and educational experience.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results highlight how Generation Z perceives and values sustainable fashion, upcycling, and garment regeneration practices (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The evidence suggests that young people place great importance on personalization, uniqueness, and product transparency, and that digital platforms enabling active participation in garment transformation significantly increase engagement, trust, and willingness to adopt sustainable behaviors (Pizzetti et al., 2021; McKnight et al., 2002). For companies and designers, this implies the opportunity to integrate ethical marketing strategies and innovative solutions combining creativity, sustainability, and digital interaction (Fletcher, 2014; Amed & D'Auria, 2025). From an academic perspective, according to the findings, it is confirmed the need to integrate educational paths combining sustainability, upcycling, and digital interaction within Fashion Design and Communication Design programs, fostering interdisciplinary skills and creative design capabilities oriented toward material regeneration (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). The study's impact for policymakers is equally significant. The data provide concrete insights into young consumers' behaviors, motivations, and barriers toward sustainable practices (Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Such evidence can guide public policies by promoting incentives and regulations supporting brands and digital platforms that adopt regenerative practices (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Moreover, these findings can inform educational campaigns and awareness programs targeting young consumers, contributing to reducing the gap between declared awareness and actual behaviors (Ajzen, 2020). Policymakers can also use this evidence to encourage the creation of participatory digital infrastructures, making sustainable fashion more accessible, understandable, and attractive, and to foster transparency throughout the supply chain, ensuring clear information on the environmental and social impact of products (Pizzetti et al., 2021). The proposed digital platform represents not only an innovative tool for user engagement with sustainable fashion but also a replicable model of participation and learning, with potential benefits for industry, academia, and public policy (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The research presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample is predominantly concentrated in creative and academic fields, which may influence responses and reduce representativeness of the wider population (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Moreover, the use of an online questionnaire introduces potential self-selection bias, as participants who chose to respond may be more interested or sensitive to sustainable fashion than those who did not participate (Bryman, 2016). Consequently, the results cannot be statistically generalized to the entire population. However, these limitations do not compromise the exploratory value of the study, which aims to identify trends, behaviors, and

design opportunities in sustainable fashion and upcycling, providing useful guidance for future academic and professional developments (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The study confirms that Generation Z possesses sustainable sensitivity but requires systems designed according to human-centered principles to translate values into action (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Ajzen, 2020). Upcycling, supported by an interactive digital platform, emerges as a practice capable of combining sustainability, creativity, and participation (McDonough & Braungart, 2002; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). The work demonstrates that design can play a strategic role in rethinking fashion as a regenerative system, where technology, visual communication, and co-creation become levers for real change (Fletcher, 2014; Pizzetti et al., 2021). The added value lies in transforming the user from a passive consumer into a co-author of the upcycling process through visualization, guidance, and interaction with professionals (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Pizzetti et al., 2021). Sustainability is presented not as a moral imposition but as a creative, educational, and identity-driven experience (Crane, 2012; Fletcher, 2014).

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