# **Consumer Behaviour of Controversial Fashion Advertising**



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# **Consumer Behaviour of Controversial Fashion Advertising**

#### 2. CHAPTER 2

## 2.1. Chapter 2a - LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1.1. Introduction

Controversial fashion advertising has become a relevant issue in consumer behaviour research, especially regarding its influence on Generation Z. With its distinctive features and spending habits, this group responds differently to controversial advertising compared to other generations and is in the spotlight of marketers and analysts (Liu and Hei, 2021). This literature study will identify controversial advertising and analyse how it influences Generation Z's perceptions. Theories like the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) will also be examined.

Purchase intention is essential while analysing Generation Z customers' reactions to sensitive marketing. This term indicates how consumers are influenced by advertising to the point of buying a product they like or desire. The adverts, intrinsically, may dramatically affect their opinions either affirmatively or negatively, thus influencing the consumers' choices of Gen Z (de Klerk, Kearns and Redwood, 2019)

Brand loyalty is another aspect that signifies how consumers have favored a particular brand for a long time, mainly due to advertising. Gen Z, a generation exceptionally knowledgeable about authenticity and socially responsible bottom line, can build brand loyalty due to controversial advertising that shares their ethics and concerns (Ammed et al., 2019). Nevertheless, brand loyalty is prone to drop if the ad is offensive or inappropriate (Neuro, 2021).

Fashion advertising ethics and social responsibility are becoming more significant, especially among Generation Z (Norris, 2022). They support social and environmental firms more,

suggesting a sustainability and ethical consumption trend. Fashion ads that address or neglect these issues can strongly influence customer behaviour (Adeola et al., 2021). The literature review will explain the intricate relationship between controversial fashion advertising and Generation Z's consumer behaviour, emphasising the necessity to understand how this demographic's distinctive qualities affect their views and purchases.

## **2.1.2.** Existing contributions of other authors

Researchers in consumer behaviour via controversial fashion advertising have explored various views, interrogating the influence various factors play in conditioning consumer perception and choice. Ting & de Run (2012) provide a study investigating the view of Gen X and Y on controversial ads, which forms the basis of machine translation from the age group. Even though Ting's work is based on previous generations, she lays the groundwork for exploring Gen Z's distinctive expressions toward questionable ad campaigns.

Francis and Hoefel (2018) investigate Gen Z features and brand consequences. The generation is well-educated and sensitive about brands, scandals, and controversies. Tailored to their distinct buying pattern, originality and need for fairness, the study shows that it is essential to investigate Generation Z's view of controversial ads. Pandiot (2015) presents an integrated analysis of "Generation Z", revealing their opinions, views, and personalities that are important for assessing the fashion space regarding the recent advertisement controversial fashion.

In their study, Bergh and Behrer (2016) focus on branding with generations Y and Z. They highlight that generation Z's primary demand is authenticity, and they must be gratified quickly, which seriously influences their consumer behaviour. Generation Z consumers' perception of fashion advertising can be either persuaded or repelled based on the level of its reckoning with their priorities and expectations.

Research by Bachnik and Nowacki (2018) takes up the issue of socially responsible (versus controversial) ads influencing consumer trust and behaviour. The study says controversial advertising might work if it grabs attention and evokes emotion. However, ethical limits and brand impression are raised. Their discussion of socially responsible and controversial advertising suggests that while attention-grabbing commercials might be beneficial, they must not breach ethical lines to preserve consumer confidence. Consumers choose businesses that share their beliefs, demonstrating that advertising trust is crucial. This illustrates that fashion firms must carefully handle challenging advertising to reach customers without upsetting or alienating them. Parsons, Maclaran and Chatzidakis (2017) consider marketing problems in the fashion industry and suggest they play a role in consumer buying behaviour. Through market research, many consumers are now very coquettish to marketing statements and goals. The book amplifies the importance of understanding how ever more touchy advertisements impact consumer behaviour due to multiple market shifts and increasing consumer awareness. Fromm and Read (2018) cover Generation Z marketing, stipulating that companies must recognise and cater to their likes and principles. They discover how Generation Z interacts with controversial fashion marketing through that research.

Based on Patagonia's campaign, Hwang et al. (2016) depict consumer attitudes towards anticonsumption apparel. The research finds that the anti-consumption notices in clothes marketing can cause diverse consumer responses driven and shaped by personal values and the integrity of the brand message. The degree of success of such advertising relies on how well a brand can associate its message with the beliefs of consumers and the social context. Valaei and Nikhashemi's (2017) study of Generation Y's market behaviour in fashion apparel through the lens of planned behaviour and optimal distinctiveness theories is discussed. They reveal how

Generation Z may react to controversial fashion advertising. They show Generation Y's complicated fashion-buying decisions, motivated by originality and societal conformity. Fashion marketers must address Generation Y's psychological drives, especially their sensitivity to

Lantos's (2015) research centres on the practical side of fashion marketing theories and exercises that analyse the complex issues in marketing management. Lantos provides insights into consumer

behaviour, bringing more complex structures to people's reactions to controversial adverts. The

practical side of fashion advertising is also under scrutiny. Customer behaviour research regarding

controversial advertising works well if it includes both theories and practicalities for the current

situation on the market.

provocative advertising.

Consumer behaviour towards controversial fashion advertisements comprises various layers, for instance, trust in endorsements, ethical reflections, anti-consumption movements, generational differences, and the hypersocialness of media. In their research, Chu, Kamal and Kim (2019) revisit the impact of social media advertising on luxury product purchase intentions. This study

shows that social media channels either enhance or lessen the impact of controversial

advertisements. The advertising campaign, therefore, should be applied strategically on these

platforms. De Klerk, Kearns, and Redwood (2019) argue that the ethical and ecological issues

raised by the leather industry in fashion are significant. These findings help explore how

Generation Z's morality and environmental values influence their reactions to controversial fashion

advertising.

These studies, therefore, show how consumer attitudes towards controversial fashion campaigns are not linear phenomena and can take a very complex turn. The essential takeaways relate to the consistency between an advertising message and consumer ethics and culture and social media's

impact on fashion brand views. This aspect of generational understanding is vital when crafting campaigns that connect with targeted customers.

#### **2.1.3.** Theoretical framework

## 2.1.3.1. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The theory of Planned Behaviour has existed for a long time. That explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control impact one's intention and behaviours. The TPB suggests that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control affect behavioural intentions; these control behaviour (Asare, 2015). TPB examines customer motives and social forces in controversial fashion advertising to explain purchase decisions.

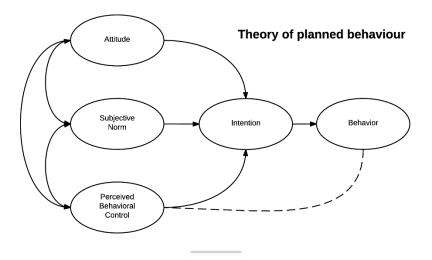


Figure 1: TPB

Valaei and Nikhashemi (2017) utilise the TPB and the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory to illustrate the influence of individuality and social conformity on the decision-making of younger consumers. Jain, Khan, and Mishra (2017) examine the wearing fashion of luxury brands in India using the TBP. Consumer attitudes shaped by cultural and social conventions strongly affect purchase intentions. The study shows how cultural context affects consumer advertising responses. Understanding regional consumer behaviour is crucial for global fashion firms. TPB adapts to

varied cultural situations, yet it may struggle to meet the diverse and frequently changing fashion trends and issues.

Ajzen (2016) applies TPB to understand food consumption decisions, highlighting how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control guide consumer behaviour. While effective in explaining the role of intention in behaviour, the model may not fully account for the impulsive or emotional aspects of consumer decisions, particularly in fashion, where aesthetic and social influences can be significant drivers. Yadav and Pathak (2017) extend TPB by integrating environmental concerns, highlighting how additional factors can influence consumer behaviour. The extension of TPB in this study showcases its flexibility; however, it also suggests that the basic TPB model may need modifications to fully explain behaviours in specific contexts, such as the ethical considerations in controversial fashion advertising.

Using TPB and reasoned action, Paul, Modi and Patel (2016) predicted green product consumption. The study incorporates environmental concerns into TPB, showing its application in predicting green product consumption. While the survey underscores TPB's adaptability, it also indicates potential limitations in addressing the broader spectrum of factors affecting consumer behaviour, such as the rapidly evolving trends and ethical considerations in the fashion industry. Han and Stoel (2016) used TPB to analyse socially responsible consumer behaviour (SRCB), particularly in avoiding sweatshop clothing. Their meta-analytic review highlights how TPB effectively predicts SRCB by integrating ethical self-identity, which extends the model. While TPB's application to SRCB in fashion is insightful, critics argue that the model may not fully capture fashion consumption's emotional and impulsive aspects, especially in response to controversial advertising.

Delistavrou (2021) examined the TPB's contribution to explaining boycott actions when the influence of political control and demographics are included as moderating factors. Research gets into modifying TPB by considering even broader social and political factors. Yet, it also shows the model's limitations due to its simplicity in explaining much more complicated boycott behaviour in the fashion industry. Riptiono (2019) expands TPB by expounding how Islamic religion impacts female Muslims' fashion trends. It was identified that religious values greatly affect fashion buying intentions among shoppers. In this research, TPB is demonstrated in its novelty, namely, interlinking religiosity in its applications; however, a drawback is in its capability to explain the complicated relationship between religion, personal identity and trendy clothes. Rozenkowska (2023) did a systematic review of TPB in consumer behaviour research, showing that TPB is widely used in fashion and many others. The review confirms TPB's robustness but suggests that further research is needed to explore its application in the dynamic and evolving context of fashion advertising.

Critics argue that the theory has to be expanded to adequately understand consumer behaviour in reaction to problematic fashion advertisements (Sniehotta, Presseau, & Araújo-Soares, 2014). Balenciaga's ads blend high fashion with social critique. Some of their commercials have used apocalyptic or disturbing images to question beauty norms and customer expectations (Satenstein, 2020). Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), it can be argued that Balenciaga's controversial campaigns affect consumers' attitudes towards the brand, high fashion's social norms, and perceived behavioural control by attracting or repelling potential buyers based on their personal and societal values. TPB explains how controversial advertising may alter brand views and purchase intentions.

## 2.1.3.2. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) outlines how attitudes change (Interaction Design Foundation, 2017). It gives a solid foundation for studying how people perceive persuasive messages like controversial fashion ads. It proposes two main persuasion routes: the core route, used when people are motivated and can comprehend information, and the periphery route, used when they can't.

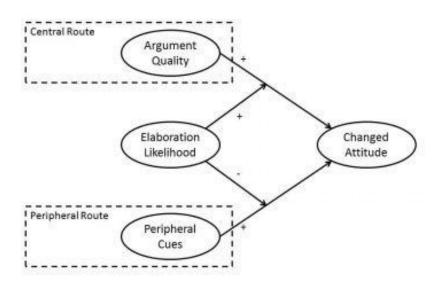


Figure 2: ELM (Interaction Design Foundation, 2017)

Kitchen et al. (2014) comprehensively review ELM, which covers how it can be applied and calls for future research. Conversely, they make the same point about how well the linear model ELM applies in difficult real-world cases where consumers move between several stages in a not-so-straight-line fashion. The criticism emphasises that although ELM is well-established in controlled experimental grounds, the model's effectiveness in a dynamic environment where consumers' behaviours are digitally influenced should still be subject to further scrutiny. Zhou (2012)

examines ELM to understand initial trust in mobile banking and which self-efficacy component

drives ELM. This method shows ELM's relevance to trust research but is concerned with its

capacity to capture the complex dynamics of trust building in new technology areas.

El Hedhli and Zourrig (2023) contrast the ELM with the Unimodel persuasion in advertising

contexts. They highlight that ELM remains dominant in explaining how consumers process

advertising messages, suggesting that informative and transformative message styles can be

effective depending on the consumers' level of involvement and ability to process information. Shi

et al. (2018) delve into how ELM can explain users' information dissemination behaviour on social

networking sites. They argue that understanding the central and peripheral routes can help

marketers devise more effective online strategies, especially in social media's fast-paced and often

controversial realm.

Moscato's (2018) research on audience cognition in media environmental advertising via ELM

reveals that this ELM model successfully identifies engagement levels with controversial

commercials. This empirical evidence reinforces the importance of ELM for measuring the effect

of controversial content on the attention and persuasion of the audiences. ELM principle is used

by Babu (2012) in the evaluation of PETA's print advertising to explain the mutuality of

communication that draws the audience along either way through the persuasion of either content

depending on the alignment of both readers' values and their attention.

For example, Benetton is known for its controversial advertisements. Historically, the brand has

used social issues as a backdrop for its campaigns, addressing topics like race, war, and AIDS

(Brough, 2001).

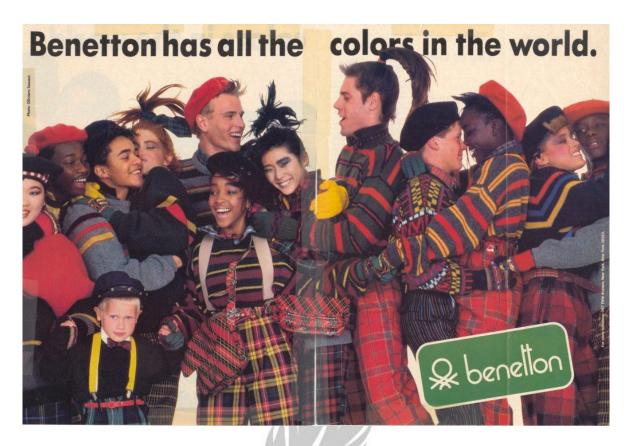


Figure 3: Benetton's controversial advertisement (Collins, 2019)

Those ads had different views on it, stimulating the debating process and discussions related to the role of advertising in handling societal issues. From the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) point of view, Benetton's ads are probably consumers' activators via the central processing trail, whereby the audience starts to think deeply about the message, raising lasting effects. Advertising offers insights into how audiences respond to these ads and how their engagement type (central vs. peripheral) drives different actions.

### **2.1.4.** Conclusion and research questions

The TPB and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) literature study on consumer behaviour towards controversial fashion advertisements highlights many significant difficulties. TPB and ELM demonstrate the many dynamics that affect customer reactions to controversial fashion advertising. TPB highlights the importance of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control,

while ELM focuses on information processing routes. Consumers increasingly scrutinise the ethical implications of advertising content. The alignment of brand values with consumer ethics significantly impacts brand perception and behaviour. The reviews suggest that both cultural background and generational characteristics (especially concerning Generation Z) play critical roles in shaping responses to controversial advertising. The growing role of digital media in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours underscores the need for contemporary models to account for these influences effectively.

## 2.1.4.1. Central Research Question:

• How do the ethical considerations and digital influences within controversial fashion advertising affect the purchasing behaviour of Generation Z consumers?

To explore this central question, the following sub-questions:

- i. How do Generation Z's ethical values and perceptions of social responsibility in fashion advertising influence their brand loyalty and purchasing decisions?
- ii. In what ways do digital platforms and social media alter the effect of controversial fashion advertising on Generation Z's consumer behaviour?
- iii. How do the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Elaboration Likelihood Model explain

  Generation Z's processing and response to controversial fashion advertising?
- iv. How do Generation Z's cultural background and generational traits influence their attitudes towards controversial fashion advertisements?

### 2.2. Chapter 2b - Literature Review and Market Data Analysis

In exploring consumer behaviour regarding controversial fashion advertising, it's evident that younger consumers, particularly Gen Z, are increasingly aligning their purchasing habits with their social and environmental values. Brands like Nike, Levi Strauss, and Balenciaga have engaged

with social causes, reflecting a broader industry trend towards 'woke' consumerism (Amed et al., 2019). These actions resonate with younger demographics and carry risks if perceived as insincere or inconsistent. Consumers, especially the younger generation, are using their purchasing power to express their values, leading to a shift in how brands approach advertising and product alignment with social and environmental causes.

Over the past three years, a third of global consumers have increasingly considered their values and views in their purchasing decisions. The word "feminist" saw a more than fivefold increase in fashion retailer homepages and newsletters from 2016 to 2018 (Amed et al., 2019). In the fashion, apparel, and beauty sectors, the number of B-Corporations rose to nearly 200 by April 2018, up from just seven in 2010, indicating a shift towards more sustainable business practices (Amed et al., 2019).

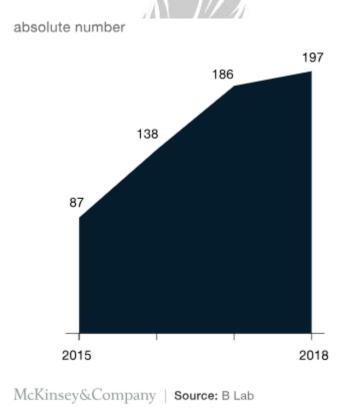


Figure 4: Fashion, beauty, & apparel B- corporations (Amed et al., 2019)

The State of Fashion 2024 report by McKinsey points to a landscape marked by uncertainty, with expected global industry growth of 2 to 4 percent (McKinsey & Company, 2023). While still profitable, the luxury segment faces challenges due to economic pressures affecting consumer spending. Geopolitical instability, financial volatility, and inflation are significant concerns impacting the fashion sector. The global average headline inflation rate is predicted to moderate to 5.8% in 2024, down from 6.9% in 2023, influencing consumer spending and fashion industry dynamics (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

High fashion brands like Benetton and Balenciaga have often utilised controversial advertising to draw attention and make social statements. In the early 1990s, Benetton released ads that featured provocative images, such as a blood-smeared newborn baby and a man dying of AIDS, leading to widespread controversy (Girling, 2004). The "We, On Death Row" campaign in 2000, showcasing interviews and photos of death-row inmates, resulted in lawsuits and backlash, ultimately impacting Benetton's retail relationships and leading to significant changes within the company (Day, 2001).

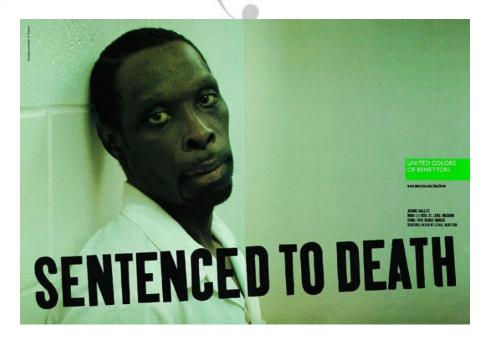


Figure 5: Benetton Controversy (Turner, 2020)

In the fall of 1991, Benetton tried to provoke conversation on the stereotypes of good and evil with an advertisement featuring an angel and the devil. Officially, the company said they aimed to "feature images from the real world which have some social and universal relevance, to break through the barrier of indifference which often surrounds these issues." What the campaign did was create unprecedented outrage and controversy.



Figure 6: Benetton's campaign (Turner, 2020)

Another brand name, Balenciaga, in their Christmas 2022 campaign, Balenciaga featured children holding teddy bears dressed in what appeared to be BDSM-inspired outfits alongside a campaign that included legal documents related to child pornography laws (Parisi, 2022). This led to significant backlash, legal actions, and public apologies from the brand (Michie, 2022).



Figure 7: Balenciaga's Christmas 2022 campaign

Celebrities like Kim Kardashian, who had close ties with Balenciaga, publicly condemned the campaign and reconsidered their relationship with the brand. The controversy led to a broader discussion on accountability and ethical advertising in fashion (Gilchrist, 2022).



Figure 8: Balenciaga's Spring 23 campaign (Gilchrist, 2022)

The fashion industry faces significant economic and geopolitical uncertainties affecting consumer spending, particularly in the luxury segment. Consumer behaviour increasingly leans towards sustainability, impacting purchasing decisions, with a notable preference for ethical and environmentally friendly practices. Technological advancements and digital platforms are reshaping consumer expectations, necessitating that brands innovate and adapt to these changes.

# **Research Question:**

• How do sustainability concerns and digital transformation influence consumer behaviour towards controversial fashion advertising in the luxury segment?



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