



# **The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Behaviour in the Fashion Industry: A Comparison Between Generations**

Natalia Kivimäki

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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## Abstract

<b>Author(s)</b> Natalia Kivimäki
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<p>This research-based thesis explores the role of corporate social responsibility on consumer behaviour (CSR) in the fashion industry and compares generations of consumers. Previously, there have been some studies conducted on the role of sustainability and CSR on the behaviour of young consumers, while the comparison between younger and older generations has been left mostly untapped. The topic of CSR has been, and will increasingly continue to be, a transformative topic in the fashion industry.</p> <p>The primary research for this thesis was conducted through a mixed-methods survey. The sample of respondents (n = 69) consisted of fashion consumers, of various generations and with diverse backgrounds. The respondents provided their views on the importance of CSR, their purchasing behaviour and how they would like fashion companies to communicate about CSR.</p> <p>The results of the survey indicated that consumers generally consider CSR to be very important in the fashion industry. There were clear generational differences in how much CSR was considered before purchasing decisions and where that information was found. While older generations relied on traditional sources for information, such as the news, media, and word-of-mouth, younger generations diversified their sources by including social media and reports.</p> <p>The most important aspects of CSR for all generations were ethical labour practices and environmental sustainability. Younger generations focused on transparency, while older generations focused on the net neutral approach of avoiding harm through business operations.</p> <p>Fashion companies being transparent about their CSR practices increased trust from consumers of all generations. However, only the youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, were consistent in trusting, purchasing from and paying more for transparent CSR practices.</p> <p>All generations showed an interest in learning more about the CSR practices of fashion companies, although preferences on which channels they should market through differed, as did opinions on company motives for CSR.</p> <p>This thesis offers its value to fashion companies by indicating the direction towards which consumer behaviour is moving and thereby helping them make educated decisions on CSR matters based on their target market. The companies willing to modernize will be rewarded with a loyal consumer market now and in the future.</p>
<b>Keywords</b> Corporate social responsibility, consumer behaviour, fashion industry, marketing, fast fashion.

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# 1 Introduction

This is a research-based bachelor's thesis for the International Business Degree Program with a major specialization in Marketing at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. It discusses the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in consumer behaviour in the fashion industry and compares the perceptions of different generations. This chapter will act as a base for the rest of the thesis, presenting the topic and its background, the research question and objectives, the benefits of the thesis, and the key concepts.

This thesis aims to increase the understanding of companies in the fashion industry on how different generations of consumers view corporate social responsibility.

## 1.1 Background to the topic

The reasons we buy clothing vary, as do the reasons why we buy from certain brands. For some, their clothing is simply a practical means to stay warm. For others, clothing can represent their personality or be an important status symbol. (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 227). It may also represent belonging and reflect the social groups with which the consumers identify (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 280).

Fashion companies are a source of many benefits to the communities around them and society at large through employment, tax contributions, and economic development. However, they can also be the source of vast environmental destruction, human suffering, and animal cruelty. (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 8). Notably, the fashion industry is recognized as the second-largest polluter worldwide and is responsible for approximately 10% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, highlighting an urgent need for improvement (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 370).

The fashion industry produces over 100 billion garments annually (Haski-Levenethal 2022, 370). One of the main concerns associated with fast fashion is that, while consumers purchase clothing more frequently, each item is worn fewer times than in the past (Fernie & Grant 2015, 10–12). On average, an article of clothing is used only seven to eight times before it is discarded (Luján-Ornelas, Güereca, Franco-García & Heldeweg 2020, 2). In response to these concerns, a countermovement known as “slow fashion” has emerged. Slow fashion places importance on slowing down the consumption of fashion in all its stages and reducing the production of new clothing, as well as the use of virgin materials. (Pookulangara & Shephard 2013, 2).

The environmental impact of overconsumption in the fashion industry can be vividly illustrated by one estimate: *"An equivalent of a rubbish truck load of clothes is incinerated or buried in landfill*

*every second of every day*" (Business of Fashion & McKinsey & Company 2022, 83). Although these figures are not new to the fashion industry, consumers now have access to such information on an unprecedented scale. Consequently, mass media have highlighted the industry's poor working conditions, use of child labour, and environmental issues, including contaminated water supplies, soil degradation, and pollution (Lowe 2023, 2). Since nearly all consumers now have access to social media, such platforms can amplify demands for more sustainable CSR practices (Maguire 2020). As a result, consumers increasingly expect companies to act more responsibly (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 8).

Given these significant environmental and social challenges, many companies have turned to CSR initiatives to address consumers' concerns. The motives for implementing CSR practices vary, from ethical reasons to image polishing. Research indicates that implementing CSR initiatives can enhance a company's bottom line, as consumers are more inclined to purchase from businesses with positive reputations. In addition, governments and partner organizations favor working with businesses addressing societal challenges. (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 8).

Despite these benefits, existing research does not clarify how different consumer segments vary in their willingness to purchase clothing from companies with either positive or negative CSR reputations. Understanding generational nuances is crucial, as different generations may respond differently to the same CSR messaging and practices. This area is largely unexplored in current literature and is the research gap that this thesis aims to address.

Finally, the topic was chosen for its academic relevance at the time and personal interest in sustainable fashion. The following chapters will build upon this background, exploring generational responses to CSR within the fashion industry.

## **1.2 Research question and investigative questions**

**RQ:** How do corporate social responsibility practices in the fashion industry influence the consumer behaviour of different generations?

**IQ 1.** How do consumers from different generations research the CSR practices of fashion companies?

**IQ 2.** What aspects of CSR do consumers from each generation consider important?

**IQ 3.** How do different aspects affect purchase behaviour?

**IQ 4.** How should companies market the CSR aspects important to each generation?

Table 1. Overlay matrix of the research methods.

Investigative questions	Theoretical Framework	Survey questions	Results
IQ 1. How do consumers from different generations research the CSR practices of fashion companies?	Information deficit model Consumer decision-making process	Answered by quantitative survey questions 4 and 5.	4.1
IQ 2. What aspects of CSR do consumers from each generation consider important?	Carbon insetting Carroll's CSR pyramid Consumer activism	Answered by quantitative survey question 6, and qualitative questions 13 and 14.	4.2
IQ 3. How do different aspects affect purchase behaviour?	CPA Sustainable consumption gap Belief-driven buyers	Answered by quantitative survey questions 3, 9, 10 and 11.	4.3
IQ 4. How should companies market the CSR aspects important to each generation?	10 P's Triple Bottom Line Competitive advantage Five R's of circularity	Answered by quantitative survey questions 7 and 8, and qualitative question 15.	4.4

### 1.3 Delimitation of Research Scope

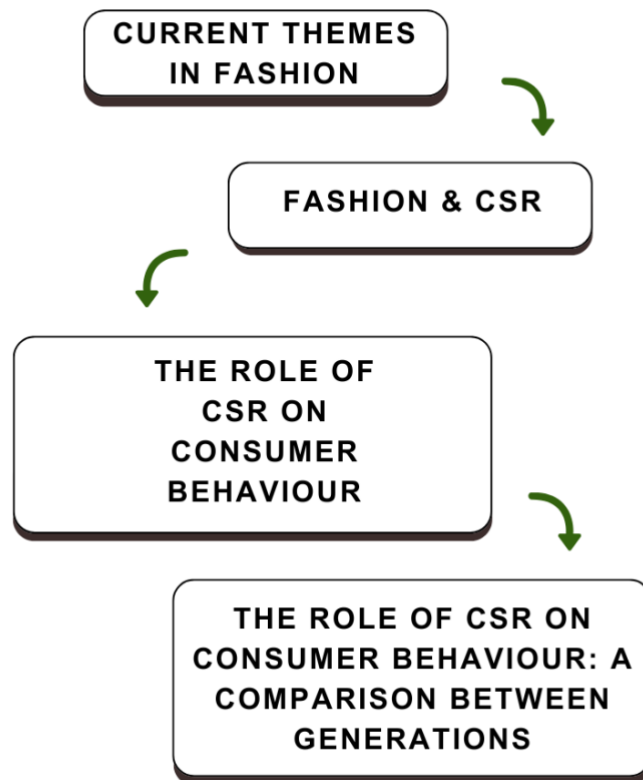


Figure 1. The delimitation process.

The topic of this thesis has been examined from different perspectives. The delimitation process was started by choosing an industry, which in this case was fashion. This is because of both professional and personal interests. A vast amount of supporting literature has been written on the fashion industry. Considering the current and future themes in the fashion industry, sustainability was quoted as "the future of fashion" (McKinsey & Company 2020, 3).

However, sustainability seemed overused and thoroughly researched as a topic. Due to this, it was deemed unlikely that any new contributions to the discussion could be made. From there, CSR in the fashion industry emerged as an area of particular interest. This is because CSR has not been researched to the same magnitude as sustainability.

It became apparent that existing research articles were written on Generation Z's attitudes toward CSR. However, little research has been conducted on older generations. There also seemed to be

a gap in comparing younger and older generations. This inspired the comparison of generational differences.

The research divides participants into three generational cohorts for clarity. The first cohort consists of those born between 1946 and 1964 (Baby Boomers) and those born before 1946. This group is included because they represent a large population segment, having been born in the post-war era, and because the global trend of population aging underscores the importance of understanding how older consumers behave in the marketplace. These groups together could be classified as seniors and, for this research, will be referred to as older generations.

The second cohort is born between 1965 and 1979 (Generation X). This generation is expected to remain a significant market for many products, making their inclusion essential for a comprehensive analysis. This generation is middle-aged, and their purchasing needs are diverse.

Finally, the research also includes those born between 1980 and 1995 (Millennials) and those born between 1996 and 2012 (Generation Z). (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 353-354). These groups represent both current and future consumers, and with the global trend of population aging, it is crucial to understand how future generations will make purchasing decisions (Hollensen 2019, 132). These two groups, especially millennials, are the target market of many businesses and have therefore been studied the most previously. (Rath et al. 2015, 15).

Respondent demographics, apart from age, such as gender, location, or nationality, were excluded from the study because they are not essential for addressing the research question.

#### **1.4 Benefits**

This thesis is not commissioned. Instead, it contributes to the field of marketing and fashion, specifically on how consumers perceive CSR and how it contributes to consumer behaviour in the fashion industry.

This thesis aims to enhance fashion companies' understanding of how different generations perceive and respond to CSR by providing research on consumer opinions and behaviours, therefore enabling more effective marketing strategies and resource allocation. By investing in consumer research, companies can react quickly to behavioural changes, build trust with consumers, and, in many cases, receive a competitive advantage (Lowe 2023, 29). Although many fashion brands already employ CSR initiatives, particularly in social sustainability, there is limited research on how these initiatives influence consumer perceptions across various age groups (Webb 2022).

By examining generational differences, this study addresses the gap in consumer research that many companies currently face, providing insights into which CSR practices resonate with specific demographics (Lowe 2023, 17–18). Given global demographic shifts, such as an aging population and declining birth rates, it is increasingly important for fashion companies to tailor their brand image and marketing efforts to both younger and older consumers, ensuring that they remain relevant and impactful for all target audiences.

## **1.5 Methodology**

The first methodology used in this thesis is a literature review. Secondary data on CSR, specifically in the fashion industry, was extensively reviewed, in addition to how different generations view the matter. The second methodology used will be a primary data collection using a survey. The research will be mono-phased and utilize mixed methods. There might be personal differences between consumers that are irrelevant to age, and therefore, to receive as wide a data set as possible, a survey composed of both qualitative and quantitative questions will be conducted.

The survey will be conducted through the survey platform Webropol. The survey is the best research method available for the topic because of the need for as large of a data set as possible and the access to respondents. The survey will be sent electronically to fashion consumers of the outlined generations. As per Haaga-Helia standards, the survey participants will not be asked personal or unnecessary questions beyond what is necessary to collect the needed data.

The sample of respondents will be diverse. It will include males and females with diverse cultural backgrounds. The majority of the respondents reside in Finland.

## **1.6 Risks and risk management**

There are two main risks involved in this thesis process. The first is unreliable data for any reason, for example, due to a mistake being made in the processing or analysis of data. To prevent any errors with data processing, it will be further researched to manage the data correctly and ensure its reliability.

Another thesis topic was considered because sustainability in the fashion industry and corporate social responsibility in Generation Z are already heavily reported. After much deliberation, it was decided that comparing two generations was a fresh perspective and allowed for the continuation of the thesis topic. However, the risk of not contributing anything new to the field or discussion does exist. The research and investigative questions will be thoroughly planned to ensure their answers are original and contribute something to the discussion.

Risks with the research method chosen, the survey, also include coverage problems. Since the survey will be conducted online, internet access to older generations is less widespread in comparison to younger generations, where practically everyone has access to the internet. Older generations could also be less likely to have the know-how on the internet to answer a survey. However, the sampling size of the survey will most likely be small, and therefore, the size of the bias in this group will likely be limited. (Vogt 2011, 293).

## 1.7 Key concepts

Below are the key concepts of this research-based thesis. They are listed in alphabetical order.

**Competitive Advantage** is *“the delivery of benefits that exceed those supplied by the competition, making your product or service the best choice for the customer and the most profitable for your organization”* (Rath et al. 2015, 10).

**Consumer behaviour** is *“the actions and decision-making processes of buyers as they recognize their desire for a product or service and engage in the search, evaluation, purchase, use, and disposal of that particular commodity. Consumer behaviour is the study of consumption: the using up of a resource by the person who has selected, adopted, used, discarded and (hopefully) recycled it.”* (Rath, Ray, Petrizzi & Gill 2015, 7).

**Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** *“encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time”*. This definition was created by the creator of the CSR concept, Archie Carroll. This is an excellent definition of CSR because it adapts to different societal expectations at any time. (Carroll 1979, 500).

The **fashion industry** is the business of making clothes. It is often distinguished between the fashion industry, which produces "high fashion", and the apparel industry, which produces "mass fashion" (Steele & Major 2024). For this thesis, the author will use the term fashion industry as an umbrella term for both sides of the industry.

**Fast fashion** is *“an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers”* (Merriam-Webster 2024).

**Marketing** *“is a process that includes the communication of all information that sellers want to share with consumers, from the time a product or service is an idea through its purchase, use, evaluation, and disposal by the customer”* (Rath et al. 2015, 10).

## 2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter will discuss the models, components, and theories that apply to the subject of this thesis. It will explore existing literature and serve as a foundation of knowledge for the remainder of the thesis. The chapter has been split into three parts: CSR in companies, consumer behaviour and CSR, and marketing CSR. The conceptual framework below will illustrate this further.

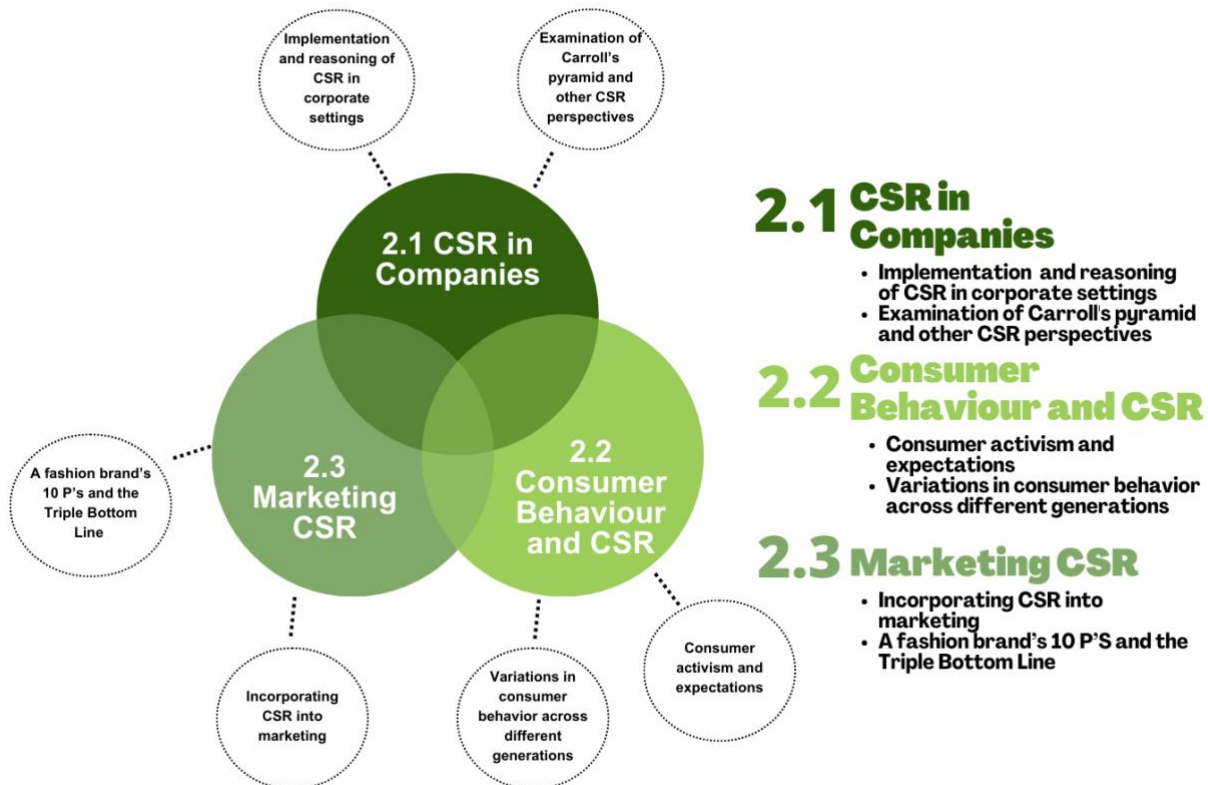


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the relationship between the key concepts.

### 2.1 CSR in companies

CSR is among the most pressing management concerns worldwide (Palihawadana, Oghazi & Liu 2016, 4; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch & Murphy 2013, 1). However, discussions surrounding the benefits and costs of CSR are complex. CSR can be resource-intensive and potentially reduce competitiveness; conversely, it may enhance a company's competitive edge by attracting positive attention. These debates are further complicated by different ideological perspectives. (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 9). This section will cover the benefits, costs, and aspects to consider about CSR from a fashion company's perspective.

### **2.1.1 Changes driving CSR**

While CSR has been a significant theoretical and practical concept in companies for nearly 70 years, there has been a shift toward an expanded corporate obligation perspective, especially in the past 40 years (Talonen, Jussila, Tuominen & Ruuskanen 2021, 1). The forces behind this change are successful, sustainable companies, an increase in consumer awareness, globalization, and the free flow of information. More recent research has also shown how consumers are more enticed to choose and advocate for products that they perceive as socially responsible. (Szöcs & Micevski 2021, 82).

The Institute of Positive Fashion (2021, 3) highlights three areas where change is needed in companies.

1. Reducing the volume of new clothing being produced
2. Product circularity maximizing the utility of clothing
3. Optimizing sorting methods and recovering materials, which reduces the use of virgin materials.

### **2.1.2 Benefits for companies**

The benefits of CSR for companies, especially in the fashion industry, are numerous. In an industry known for being unsustainable, companies known for good CSR practices may receive a competitive advantage. (Borglund, De Geer & Sweet 2021, 102; Guedes, Ferreira, Urbano & Marques 2017, 8) In addition, CSR practices may help to avoid costly government regulations, reduce stakeholder churn, and attract investors, employees, consumers, and positive media attention (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 13-14). One of the primary advantages of implementing CSR initiatives is the potential to enhance an organization's reputation. A strong reputation, in turn, has been shown to yield tangible benefits, including attracting customers, motivating and retaining employees, and improving financial performance. (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 35).

Patagonia stands out as a leading fashion company that has embraced CSR since its inception. From the very beginning, the company has prioritized environmental stewardship, a commitment evident in its business practices. For instance, Patagonia has donated one percent of its sales to environmental restoration and protection since 1985. Additionally, it reduced the number of factories from 100 to 65 to facilitate closer monitoring and ensure that its supply chain aligns with the company's values. As such, Patagonia is widely regarded as an early adopter of CSR principles. (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 39-40).

### **2.1.3 Issues implementing CSR**

A significant issue regarding CSR implementation in the fashion industry is its extensive and complex supply chains, which involve many layers of subcontractors. The longer and more intricate a supply chain is, the more challenging it becomes to monitor and enforce codes of conduct throughout (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 157). Fast fashion companies, in particular, are notorious for sourcing their products offshore to benefit from lower labour and production costs. This practice has raised serious concerns about working conditions and the potential use of child labour in offshore factories (Fernie & Grant 2015, 12).

### **2.1.4 Solutions for implementation**

A possible solution for implementing CSR could be carbon insetting. Carbon insetting means companies implementing nature-based solutions, such as renewable energy, and focusing on doing more good rather than reducing the bad. Some fashion brands implement this idea through tree planting or community water initiatives. (Lowe 2023, 70). While such an approach may be viewed as a relatively accessible solution, and any positive effort outweighs doing nothing, some question whether emphasizing a few beneficial initiatives rather than reducing harmful practices would be considered greenwashing. Instead of implementing some beneficial initiatives, it may be more sustainable to focus on reducing harmful practices, which are plentiful in the fashion industry.

It can be argued whether it matters why companies choose to implement CSR practices. Whether the practices are implemented for financial gain or because the company values ethical practices, the fact that they are being implemented benefits society, the company, and the environment.

Furthermore, the five Rs of circularity, reduce, repair, resell, rent, and recycle, offer a practical framework for companies seeking to lessen their environmental impact. Reselling clothing has gained significant popularity among young consumers through resale sites such as Vinted and Depop. (Lowe 2023, 76). Especially repairing and renting give businesses opportunities to diversify their operations and have customers returning for services after the initial purchase. Swedish clothing brand Filippa K has diversified its operations by starting a thrift shop where customers can bring used Filippa K clothing and resell them. They state that their mission is to strengthen the movement of mindful consumption. They also support customers in maintaining and repairing their clothing by offering advice online and in stores on proper washing, repair techniques, and garment care. (Borglund et al. 2021, 199-203).

### **2.1.5 Criticism of CSR**

CSR has also been criticized. One of the main criticisms of CSR is the assumption that if companies are expected to be socially responsible, they are morally grey to begin with and need to compensate for it.

According to this criticism outlined by Freeman and Velamuri (2022, 203), CSR fails to recognize how beneficial the existence of business is for society and how it has dramatically improved the lives of millions globally. This critique is reasonable because businesses can raise millions of people out of poverty. For example, a rural town in a third-world country may benefit greatly from a factory being built and offering hundreds of locals employment, regardless of whether that factory causes damage to the region's natural resources. Nonetheless, an argument could be made that tearing down natural resources should not be the sole decision of local governments or businesses because it is harmful to humanity, not solely to local citizens. This prompts the question of which outcome is more detrimental: global poverty and economic recession or harm to the environment and humanity.

### 2.1.6 Carroll's CSR pyramid

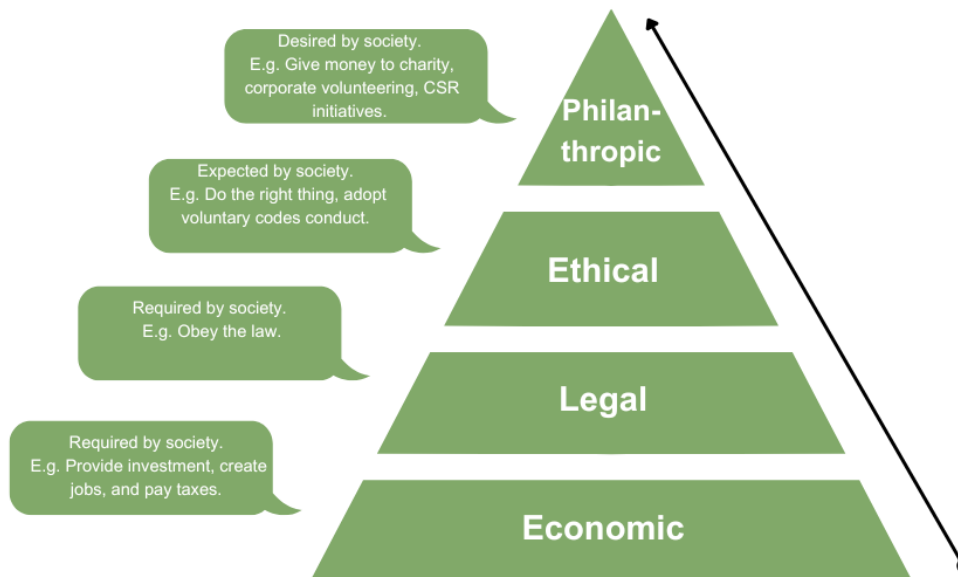


Figure 3: Carroll's pyramid of business responsibilities. Based on Carroll (1991, 42) in Haski-Leventhal (2022, 36).

Even critics, however, do not argue that CSR initiatives should override a company's economic responsibilities. A model still widely renowned in business today is Carroll's CSR pyramid (Visser 2006, 29). Its fundamental idea is that a business's responsibilities to society can be split and prioritized into four groups. From most to least pressing, the groups are economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. (Talonon et al. 2021, 2). Carroll's model of CSR helped make an essential shift from companies' responsibilities being only for themselves to a broader view of benefiting the society around them (Carroll & Shabana 2010, 7).

The model, made in 1991, has received criticism as well. This is partly due to it being made in a business environment different from today's. One of the criticisms is that since the model is a pyramid, it emphasizes a hierarchy. Since economic responsibilities are portrayed as the most important, legal obligations are placed as secondary. Another criticism of the model is the lack of sustainable responsibility. This is perhaps due to the time it was created, as there was less emphasis on sustainability in the early 1990s compared to the 2020s.

### 2.1.7 Standards for CSR

Different metrics, laws, and regulations are ways for governments and organizations to hold companies accountable for their sustainability or lack thereof (Borglund et al. 2021, 291). With the current nature of the fashion industry's fragmented and complex supply chain, it is easy to hide human rights violations and environmental abuse (Lowe 2023, 140).

With the continued demand for sustainable fashion brands, the B Corporation is one of the most used certificates that measures social and environmental standards in for-profit companies. While there have been controversies on which companies have received the prestigious certification, such as Nespresso with its alleged human rights violations, the certification is still generally held in high regard and is difficult to achieve. (Bennett 2024). Some fashion companies that have received the certificate include Ganni, Patagonia, Toms, and Chloé (Head 2024). The number of fashion companies that are B-certified has risen considerably, from 7 companies in 2010 to nearly 200 in 2018 (Amed et al. 2019). This shows the great improvement and importance placed on CSR by fashion companies.

The EU requires large and listed companies to publicly and regularly report their social and environmental risks and what impact their operations have on the environment. Since 5 January 2023, corporations have had to disclose even more details on their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) matters in annual reports, according to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). The directive is meant to enhance transparency, push companies into consistently more sustainable practices, and offer the public access to companies' environmental impacts. (European Commission 2024).

The new regulations are expected to extend outside the EU in the future, most notably into Asia, where 70% of EU textiles are being manufactured. While such directives are at the receiving end of criticism and pushback, they also offer an opportunity for companies to revamp their business models in a more sustainable and ethical direction. (The State of Fashion 2024, 91-93).

Along these lines, the European Commission is introducing the Product Environmental Footprint program, which requires brands to measure and disclose the environmental impact of their supply chains by tracing the origins of their materials and processes. Similar programs have increased worldwide, such as California's Transparency in Supply Chains Act and Germany's Supply Chain Due Diligence Act. (Raghavan 2022). More recently, the EU Green Claims Directive aims to prevent greenwashing by mandating that any sustainability-related claims and statements must be precise, supported by evidence, verified by impartial organizations, and communicated clearly.

France has become a frontrunner by requiring corporations to put carbon labels on all clothing being sold in the country. (The State of Fashion 2024, 91).

Despite these developments, companies within the fashion industry are reporting huge volumes of ESG disclosures, yet it is still questionable what metrics or actions can be considered truly sustainable (The State of Fashion 2024, 91). By a strict definition of sustainability, any company that produces products that are not fully recycled cannot be considered entirely sustainable. This implies that if production and consumption continue, some degree of environmental harm is inevitable. Therefore, if not producing and consuming fashion would be a theoretical baseline, any consumption and production is bound to be harmful because it consumes natural resources. This tension highlights the complexity of defining and achieving meaningful sustainability in the fashion industry.

### **2.1.8 Alternatives to CSR**

As a result of critiques of CSR, many alternatives have been created. One of these is the creating shared value concept (CSV), which aims to impact society positively through innovative goods and new markets (Porter & Kramer 2011). The concept is based on the thought that societal needs define markets. It could be argued that CSV is the most thoughtful concept for consumers and society. If consumers cannot purchase essential goods in their society, companies will inevitably miss out on profits. The inventors of CSV (Porter and Kramer 2011, 64) thought it to be such a revolutionary concept that they claimed it would "fix capitalism". The idea was well-received and implemented in many companies. (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 45-47).

In recent years, Freeman and Velamuri (2022, 204) have proposed company stakeholder responsibility as an alternative and broader concept to CSR. They argue that substituting 'corporate' with 'company' includes small and medium businesses and trades, instead of only holding large corporations responsible. Unlike CSR, which implies a societal value creation responsibility, company stakeholder responsibility focuses on stakeholders.

However, this shift may risk CSR practices being driven solely by maximizing profit. According to Aguilera, Rupp, Williams & Ganapathi (2007, 63), CSR implementation can be driven by moral, relational, and economic motivations. Companies increasingly adopt CSR practices due to consumer activism and heightened awareness in hopes of avoiding scrutiny. Consumer activism involves using purchasing power for political impact, such as supporting brands aligning with personal values or boycotting those that do not. (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 18-21).

## **2.2 Consumer Behaviour and CSR**

As consumers become increasingly aware of social and environmental issues, their expectations for corporate responsibility grow. In turn, these growing expectations influence purchasing decisions, brand loyalty, and market dynamics. This section will cover how CSR considerations can shape consumer behaviour and what this means for companies seeking to align CSR practices with profit.

### **2.2.1 Emergence of CSR concerns**

In 1911, a Manhattan clothing factory fire claimed the lives of 146 employees. A century later, in 2013, the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1134 employees and injuring 2500 more. While both disasters raised international scrutiny, the fashion companies that supported such unsafe work conditions largely escaped accountability. (Vijayarasa & Liu 2022). The Rana Plaza incident prompted a legal agreement known as the Accord, which was established between brands and trade unions to ensure a safe and healthy textile industry in Bangladesh (Lowe 2023, 77).

Yet many factories, often called sweatshops, continue to operate under unsafe working conditions, offering low wages and requiring long working hours. Sweatshops are most commonly used to produce fast fashion clothing as quickly as possible and at the lowest cost. (Rath et al. 2015, 374).

Although the Rana Plaza tragedy marked the first instance of life-threatening working conditions and other labour abuses being widely exposed to mainstream media and the Western world, consumers have largely continued the use of fast-fashion retailers (Lowe 2023, 2). This raises a central question: Do unethical CSR practices truly influence consumer behaviour, and if so, how?

Beyond labor safety concerns, fast fashion also carries significant environmental implications. Waste occurs at every step of a clothing product's lifecycle. Pre-consumer waste is any by-product that is discarded while making the product, and post-consumer waste is produced by the consumer when discarding a product that is no longer wanted. An average family in the Western world discards 30 kg of clothing each year, while recycling or donating only 15%. (Sustain Your Style, s.a.).

When making purchasing decisions, consumers typically follow a five-step process: recognizing a problem, gathering information on possible solutions, evaluating alternatives, selecting the best alternative, and reviewing the outcome. This is also known as the consumer decision-making

process. If consumers consider a company's CSR practices, this is most likely to occur during the information-gathering stage. (Rath et al. 2015, 287).

Furthermore, the research examines whether any observed effects differ across generations. Different generations of consumers prioritize distinct factors when making purchasing decisions. Millennials tend to look for products that are of good value, environmentally safe, connected to a cause, and beneficial to communities. Generation X does not place as much importance on price as their younger counterparts, instead seeking products for health, adventure, and fitness. Boomers look for product enhancements for the home, senior-friendly technology, and wellness. (Rath et al. 2015, 161). Consequently, a key question explored in this thesis is whether, and at which point, CSR practices influence different generations of consumer decision-making.

While CSR in the fashion industry is not new, relating it to consumer behaviour is relevant because consumers are increasingly aware that their purchases hold the power (Borglund et al. 2021, 192). They have realized that where they spend their money supports the ethics and practices of that company (Maguire 2020). This realization has led to increased consumer awareness and activism. (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 21).

### **2.2.2 Consumer activism**

Corporate political activism (CPA) is a new wave of activism on social issues. It gained substantial traction in 2020 with the Black Lives Matter movement. Many businesses engaged in "Blackout Tuesday" by suspending social media and commercial activities. This is widely thought of as the first time companies publicly stood up against social injustice on a grand scale. (Bownen-Trinh & Orujov 2023, 1-7).

An analysis of 293 companies found that a corporation's sociopolitical activism elicits an adverse reaction from investors and decreases market value. It is thought to signal resource allocation away from profit-oriented activities. This is especially so if the company values presented differ from the investor's values. (Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson 2020, 1-4).

This leaves companies at a difficult crossroads. Engaging in CPA may result in a negative reaction from investors, while not engaging may result in consumer expectations not being met.



Figure 4: Examples of companies' statements regarding Black Lives Matter (Brownen-Trinh & Orujov 2023, 7).

### 2.2.3 Consumer expectations

Unfortunately, fulfilling the CSR expectations of all consumers and stakeholders simultaneously is not straightforward. In an ideal scenario where all consumers and stakeholders place an identical level of importance on the same values, organizations could adopt uniform CSR guidelines. However, consumers and stakeholders often hold widely varying expectations and assign different degrees of significance to whether those expectations are met. (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 90-91). What those expectations are and what is naturally included in CSR also change over time and context (Borglund et al. 2021, 60).

Prior research has shown that consumers are willing to purchase from fast fashion retailers despite being aware of the ethical concerns associated with fast fashion, described as "aesthetics trumps ethics". (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan 2012, 14). It is also referred to as the sustainable consumption gap (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 487). However, the rise of belief-driven buyers suggests that not all consumer groups share the same prioritization of aesthetics.

In findings by Edelman Earned Brand (2018, 5-11), one in two people are belief-driven buyers. Of those buyers, 65% will not purchase products from a company because it stayed silent on an issue they felt it had an obligation to address. Belief-driven buyers span generations, including older consumers.

Nine in ten Generation Z consumers believe companies must address environmental and social matters. With a topic as researched as CSR, some overarching generalizations can be made. As younger generations are increasingly aware of social and environmental causes, they tend to seek fashion that supports those causes. (Lowe 2023, 12). In the fashion industry, many companies have taken the calls for action on board. H&M launched a Pride-themed collection, Balenciaga collaborated with the World Food Programme, and Moschino only started hiring models of color. (Amed et al. 2019, 46).

As noted by Palihawadana, Oghazi, and Liu (2016), companies' CSR practices correlate with positive product evaluations. The study also found that socially harmful companies receive more negative product evaluations. However, while consumers may continue purchasing from a company with poor-quality products if their CSR practices are seen positively, this depends mainly on idealism and egoism. These terms mean a person's concern for others and excessive concern for the advantage of oneself, respectively.

As these various studies present, consumer expectations are complex and vary by generation, personal values, and context.

## **2.3 Marketing CSR**

Having established the complexities of corporate responsibilities and consumer expectations, this final section will cover how businesses communicate and market their CSR practices.

### **2.3.1 Communicating CSR**

Marketing is actions that a brand undertakes to attract customers to the business through the product, messaging, and delivering brand promises. Marketing in fashion is not only about selling a product but bringing the customers into the lifestyle the brand offers, as well as tapping into the customer's dreams. (Lowe 2023, 228).

CSR is an important issue for marketers (Hollensen 2019, 336). When considering how to communicate about CSR, it is worth considering its definition. Broadly defined, it is often thought of as providing truthful and transparent information on the company's economic, social, and environmental concerns to stakeholders. While the traditional forms of CSR communication have been reports, public relations, and website content, today's environment provides additional communication closer to consumers. Companies may choose to adopt social media as a platform to communicate about CSR and also invite stakeholders to communicate and co-create CSR in collaboration with the company.

Companies tend to approach marketing CSR from different perspectives and with different goals. Some companies embrace CSR comprehensively, while others use it as a means for a positive reputation, without further depth. Studies show that while CSR integration into some business activities is generally adopted, CSR in marketing is often overlooked. (Glozer & Hibbert 2018, 3-4).

### **2.3.2 Consumer perceptions and best practices**

Consumers' views on CSR are crucial to marketers, given the central role consumers play in marketing. Suffice it to say that marketing departments must be conscious of how customers respond to various CSR initiatives and actions. (Öberseder et al. 2013, 1-8). Regardless, according to Palihawadana et al. (2016, 5), it would be advisable for companies to integrate their CSR initiatives into their marketing. This is because there is a correlation between positive product evaluations and a company's CSR.

In fact, according to a 2013 global study on CSR, 91% of consumers would be willing to switch to a brand associated with a good cause when price and quality are comparable. This finding underlines the strong influence of ethical considerations on purchasing decisions, suggesting that companies that invest in and effectively communicate their CSR efforts can gain a significant

competitive advantage. Moreover, the same study found that 84% would tell their friends and family about a company's CSR practices. This indicates the powerful influence of word-of-mouth in shaping consumer perceptions. (Cone Communications & Echo 2013, 11).

Transparency and honesty are essential elements of CSR communication, as consumers increasingly scrutinize motives for communicating about CSR. However, many consumers expect organizations to communicate about their CSR initiatives. (Glozer & Hibbert 2018, 13). Negative feelings only arise when it is seen as disingenuous due to achievements being communicated, without critical reflection of actions. Therefore, transparency and honesty are critical in achieving consumers' trust in CSR.

Studies have shown that 88% of global consumers are interested in knowing about companies' CSR practices, however, many are unwilling to use the time to search for such information and expect companies to find creative ways to communicate CSR to consumers. This is great news for companies, as it gives them an avenue for promoting their business in a manner that consumers are interested in hearing about. (Golob & Podnar 2019, 69). It is essential to consider that the messages should seem genuine instead of just marketing the company. The practices that are being promoted should be closely aligned with the goals of the organization. Therefore, it would be beneficial to the companies themselves if they conducted marketing research regularly to identify the most recent and relevant issues to consumers.

When discussing the aspects of CSR that should be highlighted in marketing, one needs to consider that consumers' concept of CSR is different from that in the literature. The most important factors of CSR for consumers are employees, customers, and the environment. This is likely because consumers can relate to being customers and employees, and the environment has been at the forefront of discussion for decades. Secondly, consumers consider the well-being of suppliers, society, and local communities. Aspects such as the media, consumer advocates, or retailers were not considered as much in CSR, contrary to the literature on the topic. (Öberseder et al. 2013, 8). A conclusion could be drawn that the aspects of CSR consumers find most engaging are the ones they relate to the most. Therefore, CSR toward customers, employees, and the environment in marketing could resonate more with consumers than other aspects.

### **2.3.3 Challenges**

As aforementioned, some consumers perceive communicating about CSR initiatives as PR or marketing tactics. According to market intelligence agency Mintel (2025, 21), global consumers trust brands less than ever and expect to see more transparency and progression in ethical initiatives. Heavily marketing CSR efforts may give the impression that it is being communicated

about more than engaged in, and appears to be image polishing. Such skepticism highlights the importance of aligning CSR initiatives with genuine brand values.

Consumers also perceive CSR initiatives as marketing tactics when they conflict with the company's business or industry (Öberseder et al. 2013, 11). For example, the forest industry's advertising may often seem like greenwashing because consumers view the industry as unsustainable regardless of CSR practices. Such marketing tactics can make it seem like the company belittles consumers' intelligence. Instead, companies could consider communicating values such as fairness, honesty, and respect, as these are unlikely to be perceived as pushing marketing gimmicks (Öberseder et al. 2013, 12).

Consumers report that they would like to know more about companies' CSR efforts; however, they are also skeptical if, in their perception, a company dedicates too much time or effort to communicating its CSR efforts (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 110). This is a difficult balance for companies to find, as going too far in either direction is deemed negatively by consumers.

#### **2.3.4 Aligning CSR with marketing strategy**

At least one point has been confirmed by extensive research over the years: consumers consider CSR as an important criterion in their decision-making process when selecting products (Borglund et al. 2021, 402). However, consumers often report being inadequately informed about the CSR practices that influence their purchasing decisions. This phenomenon is also referred to as an information deficit model (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 487). This presents a significant challenge for companies, as consumers cannot base their decisions on information they do not possess. As a result, companies must improve their communication of CSR to consumers. (Coombs & Holladay 2012, 111).

In terms of what to communicate in marketing, the fashion industry is complex. The marketing mix is a combination of factors, usually 4 or 10, that brands can use to create a strategy for marketing effectively. The basic marketing mix consists of four factors: product, place, price, and promotion. However, for fashion brands, it is essential to enhance their marketing mix with people, process, physical, packaging, personality, and proof. (Lowe 2023, 231).

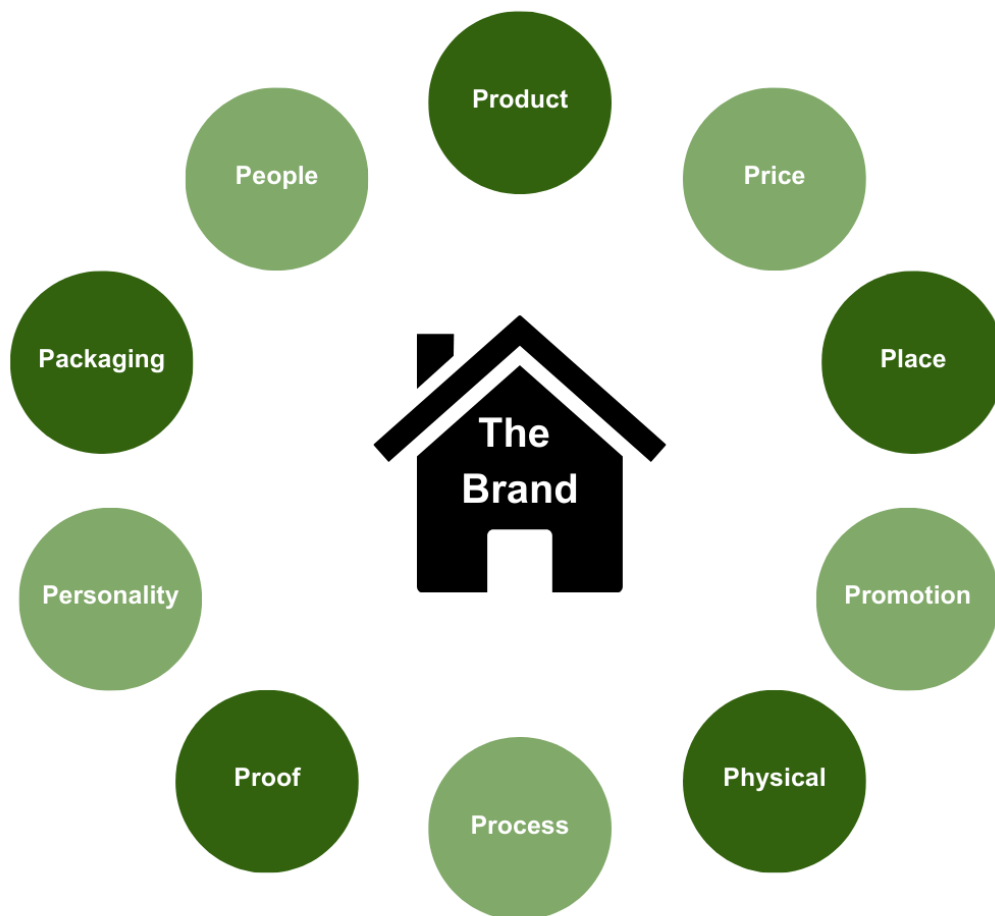


Figure 5. A fashion brand's 10 P's. Based on Lowe (2022, 232).

1. **Product** – In an oversaturated industry, it is essential to create a unique product that captures the attention of consumers. In terms of CSR and fashion, this can mean incorporating sustainable materials and partnering with suppliers that adhere to a code of conduct.
2. **Place** – Fashion can be sold both online and in a physical store. The location needs to be easily discovered and attractive to consumers. For CSR, this can mean choosing a store location that is within walking distance of public transportation. This would mean that customers don't have to drive to your location, therefore reducing carbon footprints from travel.
3. **Price** – An oversaturated market, such as fashion, has many possibilities for customers in every price range. The price of the product needs to seem sensible to the customer while

making a profit for the company. It can be worth reflecting on ethical sourcing and fair wages in pricing.

4. **Promotion** – Promoting a product can be carried out through advertising, PR, content marketing, and social media. The right channels need to be used to find the target audience. The brand needs to meet its customers where they are. Marketing genuine CSR achievements could be seen as good promotion.
5. **People** – This is a large factor, as it covers both the current and potential future customers, as well as employees in the company and supply chain. Employees should have fair wages and safe working conditions.
6. **Processes** – This factor ensures customers have a pleasant and easy time shopping with the brand, and will hopefully lead to returning customers. Processes are services the brand offers to customers, such as apps, deliveries and returns, and omnichannel systems. For example, returns can be mitigated by offering size charts or a showroom to try clothing on before it is shipped to customers. This would reduce the carbon footprint that deliveries and returns produce.
7. **Physical evidence** – Physical evidence is the tangible elements of the brand that customers can see. This includes shops, websites, and brand imagery. The physical evidence of good CSR practices can include minimal packaging, green colors, and the environmental impact of clothing included on labels.
8. **Packaging** – This mostly relates to online shopping. Since customers do not visit a physical location when placing an order online, it is even more important to make the packaging part of the experience of shopping and have it aligned with the company. For moving in a more sustainable direction, it may be worth switching to recycled packaging materials.
9. **Personality** – This can relate to factor 8; personality is the overall feeling and traits customers get from a brand. Personality helps customers feel engaged and connected to a brand. Part of a brand's personality can be its association with sustainability and social issues. For example, many brands highlight employee stories on their social media.
10. **Proof** – This is the evidence customers can find on whether a brand is suitable for them. This includes reviews, testimonials, and content. Most notably, influencers have changed this factor significantly, as customers now have a trusted “friend” who recommends which purchases to make. (Lowe 2023, 231-233). Proof includes sustainability reports and acknowledging what areas in the business can be improved upon.

### 2.3.5 Triple Bottom Line

One of the most influential frameworks in sustainable marketing is the triple bottom line (TBL), conceptualized by John Elkington in the mid-1990s. This approach evaluates company performance across social, environmental, and economic dimensions (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 467). The concept outlines that businesses can build prosperity centered on “people, planet, and profit.” It highlights how companies don’t have to choose between aligning value with profit or ensuring the well-being of the planet and people (Lowe 2023, 79).

When implemented effectively, it can provide a competitive advantage and foster long-term sustainability across all three dimensions. In the context of marketing CSR, TBL provides a comprehensive lens through which companies can design, implement, and communicate initiatives that balance profit with people and the planet. This approach not only helps businesses articulate their commitment to ethical and sustainable practices but also fosters consumer trust and differentiation in competitive markets. By incorporating TBL principles, companies can effectively align their marketing strategies with broader societal values and create long-term value for both stakeholders and the environment. (Epstein & Buhovac 2014, 42).

In summary, this chapter has highlighted the strategic role of CSR within marketing, examining how frameworks such as the extended marketing mix and the TBL can guide companies toward more responsible and transparent CSR practices. By integrating social, environmental, and economic factors into marketing, businesses can better meet evolving consumer expectations, mitigate greenwashing risks, and differentiate themselves in competitive markets. However, effectively communicating these initiatives relies on authenticity, consistency, and a clear understanding of what resonates with their target market.

The next chapter outlines the research methods used to investigate these dynamics further, detailing how data will be collected and analyzed to understand how different generations perceive and respond to CSR-driven marketing in the fashion industry.

### **3 Research Methods**

In this chapter, the research methodology will be explained. The chosen research methods, research design, data collection, and data analysis will be presented and justified. This chapter helps to build an understanding of the validity of the data and research, as well as the process behind the survey.

#### **3.1 Research design**

The research design chosen for this thesis is mixed methods. When planning the research for primary data for this thesis, it quickly became apparent that more than one method of research would be required for sufficient data on how and why CSR affects consumer behaviour and what the differences are in age cohorts. Quantitative research is viewed as involving numbers, measurements, and forms of analysis based on sampling theory. Qualitative research is everything else that falls outside of that range of numbers, including text and discourse. The mixed methods approach is a combination of the two. (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2016, 238).

Qualitative data tends to provide a detailed understanding of a subject, while quantitative data provides a more general understanding. Therefore, when qualitative research is applied, the ability to generalize the results to a larger segment of people can be lost. When quantitative research is applied, the understanding of individuals can be lost. The combination of the methods provides a more complete picture of the research question when compared to a single approach. Another benefit to using mixed methods is that if the results of the two types of research methods are contradictory for any reason, this would only become apparent in using both methods. (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, 8).

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018, 5-8), in mixed methods, the researcher collects and analyses qualitative and quantitative data, combines the two forms of data and their results, organizes them into logical research designs for conducting the study, and frames them within theory. Mixed methods research applies multiple ways to answer a research question (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, 1).

For many of the investigative questions of this research, quantitative research methods would have been sufficient. However, to understand the reasons behind why generations behave in a certain way, qualitative research needed to be conducted. Thus, the method design was fixed mixed methods (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, 52).

The quantitative data will answer IQs 1 and 3, while the mixed methods will answer IQs 2 and 4. The qualitative data and its analysis will refine and explain the qualitative results in more depth.

## **3.2 Sampling**

The survey for the research of this thesis studied the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of fashion consumers in terms of CSR. The respondents were all consumers of fashion, and no gender or location was excluded. The only excluding factor was language skills, as some Finnish respondents said they could not fill in the survey due to not understanding English well enough. This was preferable to respondents answering the survey regardless of understanding, as that would make their data invalid.

The survey was relatively straightforward to distribute because anyone who wears clothing is a consumer of fashion, regardless of how, where, and why the clothing was bought. This also allowed for the sample of respondents to be diverse, of different cultural backgrounds, ages, and genders. The survey was distributed online through social media and various online messaging platforms to diverse respondents. The link was opened on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2025 and closed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2025.

## **3.3 Data collection**

The survey for this research was conducted on the online survey platform Webropol. The survey originally had 15 questions. However, after publishing the survey, many respondents had technical difficulties with question 12 and were not able to proceed with the survey. To receive as many responses as possible, question 12 was hidden from the survey. Of the remaining 14 questions, the first two were for consent and age. Of the remaining questions, three were qualitative and the rest quantitative. Before publishing, the survey was sent to a quantitative survey specialist at Haaga-Helia. Her feedback was tremendously helpful in refining the survey and ensuring the data collected from it would be valid and as clearly interpretable as possible.

## **3.4 Data analysis**

The survey data was collected through the Webropol survey platform. It was first split into quantitative and qualitative questions and then into answers by age cohort. The data was exported from Webropol to Excel, where it was visualized into charts without any modifications made to the responses.

## **3.5 Data validity and reliability**

To ensure data validity, the survey included a short section explaining the concept of CSR as well as some common themes related to CSR in the fashion industry. Naturally, as the respondents are

a very small sample of the general population, their answers and opinions cannot be generalized to the entire population.

Moreover, the use of a mixed-methods research method enhanced the validity of the data collection by allowing respondents to elaborate on the reasons behind their opinions and behaviours.

While the review of secondary data for the theoretical framework of this thesis gave some indication into which generations tend to emphasize CSR factors in their purchasing behaviour, the analysis of the collected primary data was conducted as objectively as possible.

## 4 Results

The research for this thesis was conducted in a survey, utilizing mixed methods. The data gathered from the survey will be analysed and discussed here.

### 4.1 IQ 1

IQ 1 was “How do consumers from different generations research the CSR practices of fashion companies?”. The survey respondents were first asked to what extent they consider a clothing brand’s CSR practices before buying from them. This question was presented on a Likert scale, ranging from 'not considering at all' to 'extremely'.

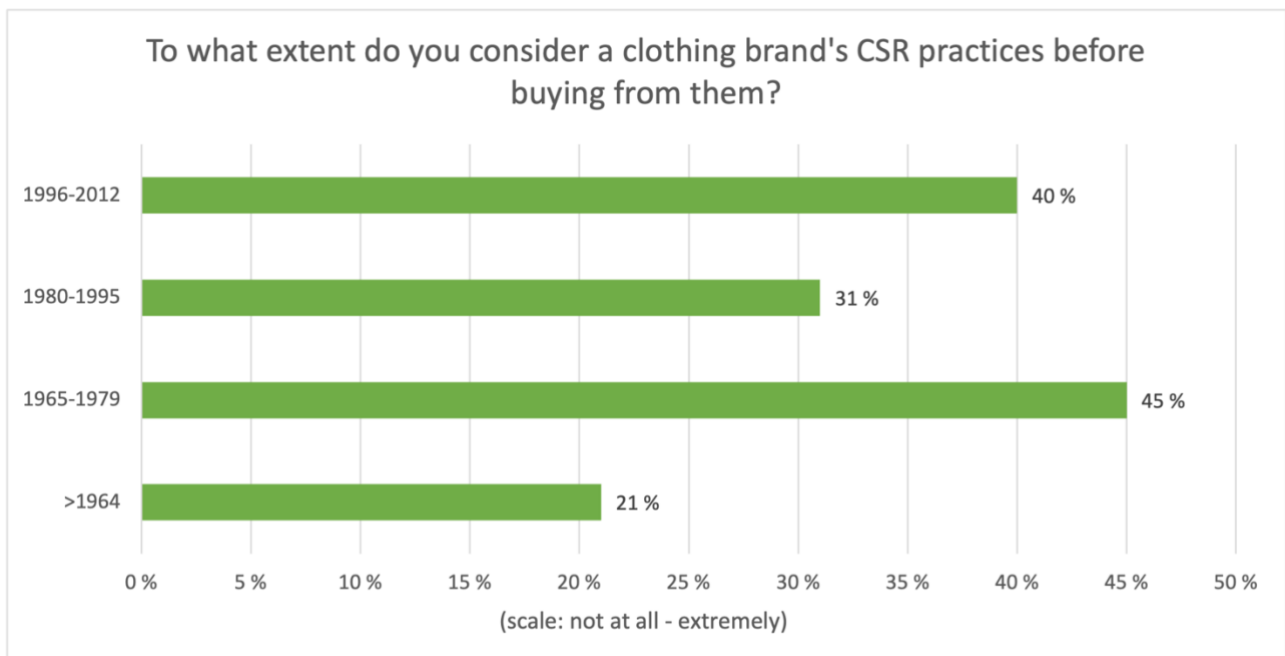


Figure 6. Respondents’ answers to what extent they consider a clothing brand’s CSR practices before buying from them. (n = 68)

The respondents born between 1965-1979 were the most conscious in this question at 45%. This could be because this middle-aged generation may have the most disposable income and can therefore make more ethically conscious purchasing decisions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the youngest respondents, born between 1996-2012, were nearly as considerate at 40%. The oldest respondents were the least conscious of CSR practices at 21%.

The next question respondents were asked to answer was where they find information about clothing brands’ CSR practices. Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers from pre-selected answers or select ‘other’ and qualitatively explain their choice.

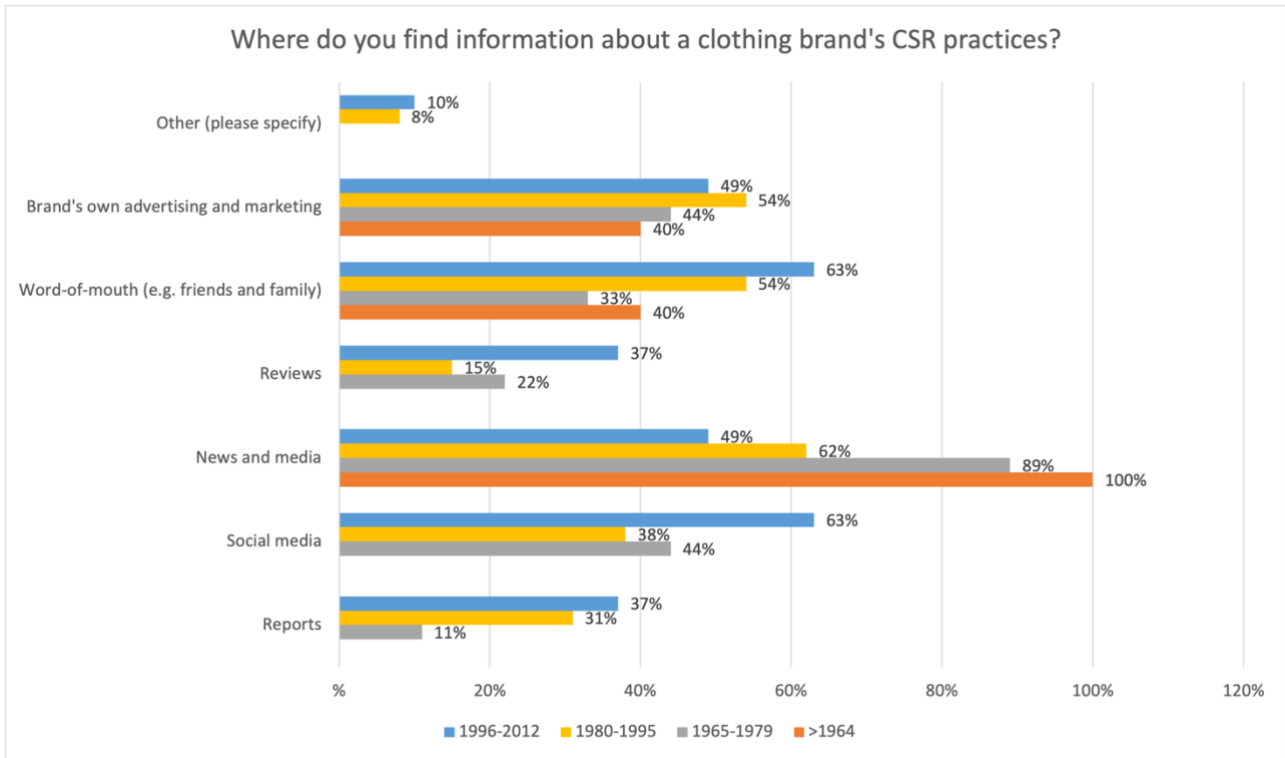


Figure 7. Respondents' answers to where they find information about a clothing brand's CSR practices. (n = 191)

The oldest generation, born before 1964, all answered that they found information about CSR through news and media. They also selected the brand's advertising and marketing, and word-of-mouth, both at 40%.

The respondents born between 1965-1979 had a more evenly distributed search for information. A majority chose news and media at 89%, in addition to other frequently chosen categories such as social media, brands' advertising and marketing.

Respondents born between 1980-1995 were significantly more evenly distributed across their answers compared to older generations. The most common answer they gave was news and media at 62%, but other high answers were word-of-mouth, brands' advertising and marketing, and social media.

The most evenly distributed generation was the youngest, born between 1996-2012. They were also the only generation whose most frequent category was not news and media, but instead social media and word-of-mouth, both at 63%. They also had many answers in the brand's advertising and marketing, as well as news and media.

These findings corroborate the strong influence of word-of-mouth acting as a marketing tool on CSR, enforcing a global study conducted by Cone Communications and Echo (2013, 11), which found that 84% of consumers would tell their family and friends about a company's CSR practices. This indicates the powerful influence of word-of-mouth in shaping consumer perceptions. (Cone Communications & Echo 2013, 11).

A respondent who chose the answer option 'other' answered that they often don't buy straight from the brand, but rather second-hand, which would result in less research being done on the CSR practices of said company. Another respondent answered that they check certificates on brand websites, while a final respondent answered

*"I primarily look at a brand's manufacturing locations and research what working conditions are like there as well as looking at individual pieces garment tags to see what materials are being used."*

The younger generations chose increasingly more evenly across categories, whereas the older generations chose largely the same categories. A contributor to this could be that there were significantly fewer older people answering the survey than younger people. The most chosen category was news and media, as it was the most popular for all generations except the youngest.

Overall, there were clear generational differences in both how much CSR is considered before making purchasing decisions and where information on CSR is found. While older generations leaned heavily on traditional sources, such as the news and word-of-mouth, younger generations diversified their sources. This indicates a shift in ethical engagement and media consumption.

## **4.2 IQ 2**

Data was collected through mixed methods to gain firsthand insights into IQ 2, "What aspects of CSR do consumers from each generation consider important?". The selection of mixed methods was influenced by its ability to obtain more personal data and the reasons behind the respondents' answers.

The first question respondents were asked to answer for IQ 2 was what factors of fashion CSR they find especially important.

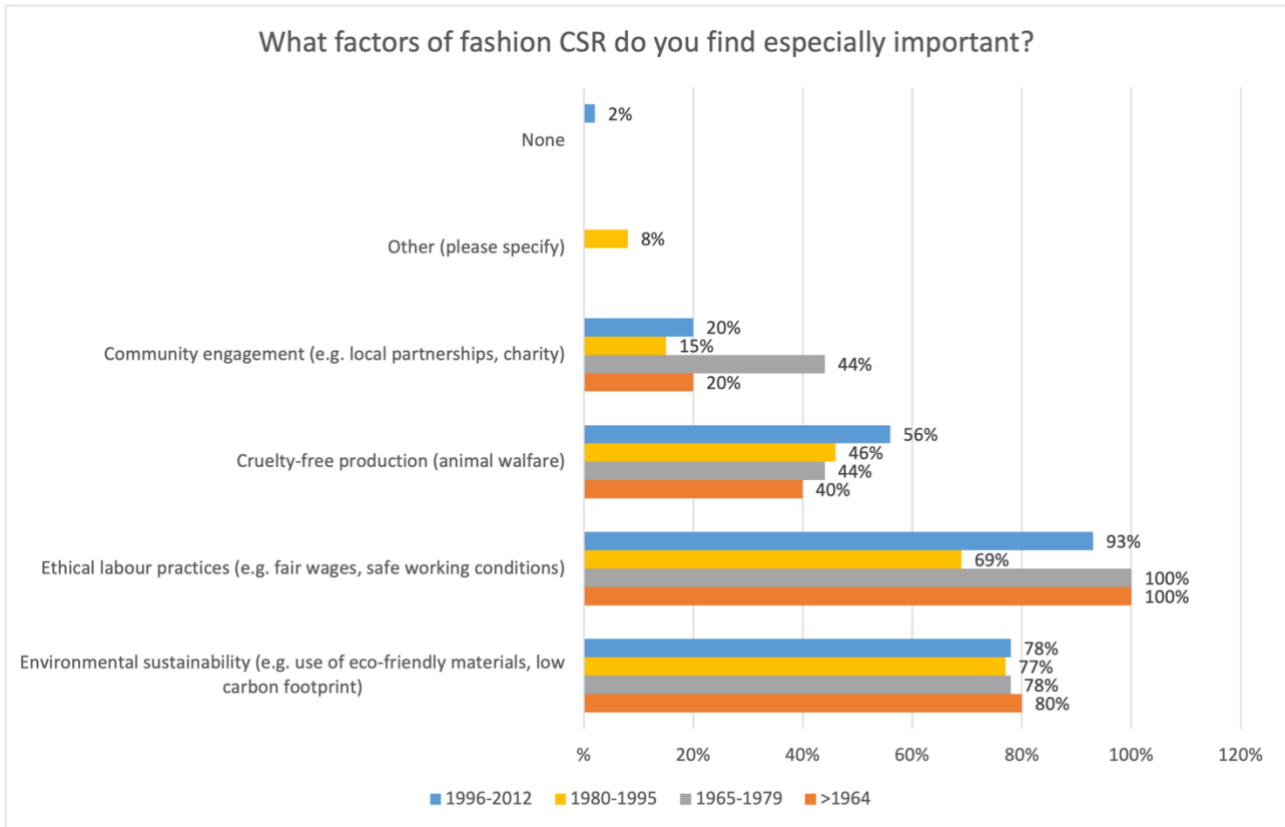


Figure 8. Respondents' answers on what factors of CSR they find especially important. (n = 166)

The most important factors by far for all generations were ethical labour practices and environmental sustainability. This data emphasizes prior research by Öberseder et al. (2013, 8), which stated the factors most crucial in the eyes of consumers as the well-being of employees, customers, and the environment. The same research stated how consumers consider suppliers, society, and communities as secondary. This is also underscored in the research conducted for this thesis.

The youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, gave the most varied answers. This generation was also the only one to answer that they do not consider any fashion CSR practices important. Given that this generation of respondents was the largest, it logically follows that they were the only ones to respond this way.

The least important factor for all generations was community engagement. On the contrary, research by Rath et al. (2015, 161) indicates that especially millennial consumers consider practices that affect their communities important. This shows a contradiction in the existing research.

The next questions respondents were asked to answer were qualitative. The first was what they consider to be a company's most important responsibility. Some answers that repeated themselves among all generations were transparency, ethical labour practices, and protecting the environment as much as possible. Especially the youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, emphasized the importance of transparency in the manufacturing process when responding. This was underlined by one such answer stating

*"Authenticity and be transparent to consumer. Don't use marketing to be something you are not. And be open about logistics and manufactor costs."*

Compared to the younger generations' care for transparency, the older generations focused on a net-neutral approach where the company should not harm people or the planet through their production. As one respondent stated

*"To not be part in causing harm to people or the environment through the production, promotion or selling of products."*

Companies in the fashion industry could utilize such knowledge by marketing according to the values of different generations. When targeting Millennials or Generation Z, brands could emphasize concrete figures or specific initiatives they have related to sustainability. In contrast, when marketing to the older generations, companies should focus on promoting the environmental neutrality of their production processes. For example, a company targeting consumers born between 1965-1979 could highlight efforts such as planting the same amount of cotton they use in producing clothing to maintain an ecological balance.

The next qualitative question respondents answered was whether they believed a company should prioritize maximizing profit, even if it comes at the expense of ethical labour practices and sustainability. Perhaps as one might expect, most of the answers for all age groups were negative. However, which generations had differing responses was worth examining. In the generation born between 1965 and 1979, one respondent answered,

*"No but sometimes some compromises are needed"*

This leaves some room for interpretation, however, clearly the respondent considers that some things may be more important than sustainability or ethical labour practices.

A respondent from the youngest cohort, born between 1996-2012, elaborated by stating

*"Depends. If it's a well established company/brand, they should start focusing more and more on sustainability and ethical practices, as well as community involvement and all of that good stuff. But*

*until the brand gets to that point, especially if it's a new startup, it can forgo some of that stuff and transparency should be key aspect. Maximizing revenue in the initial stages is completely fine, maximizing profit might be justifiable depending on how it will be "reinvested" or put back into the economy by the individual pocketing the cash."*

This response indicates that companies should adopt more ethical CSR practices as soon as possible. Notably, even the youngest generation, often considered the most conscious of CSR, acknowledges that there may be circumstances in which such practices can be forgone. This is encouraging for companies that may not yet have the resources to implement their desired CSR practices, as long as they remain transparent about current efforts and future goals.

To sum up, while ethical labour practices and environmental sustainability rose as the most important for all generations, each generation had slightly different priorities. Younger generations focused on transparency, while older generations highlighted avoiding harm. These insights can help fashion companies tailor their marketing and communication to different target markets.

#### **4.3 IQ 3**

Quantitative methods were employed to address IQ 3. The IQ, examining how different aspects influence purchase behaviour, can be effectively answered through quantitative analysis.

First, respondents were asked approximately how often they buy clothing. This was asked in a multiple-choice question, with answers ranging from weekly to once a year. Companies understanding of consumers purchasing frequencies helps them market effectively to the correct target market. For example, a consumer who purchases clothing less frequently may be exposed to different messaging from the company and value different aspects when compared to a consumer who purchases clothing more frequently.

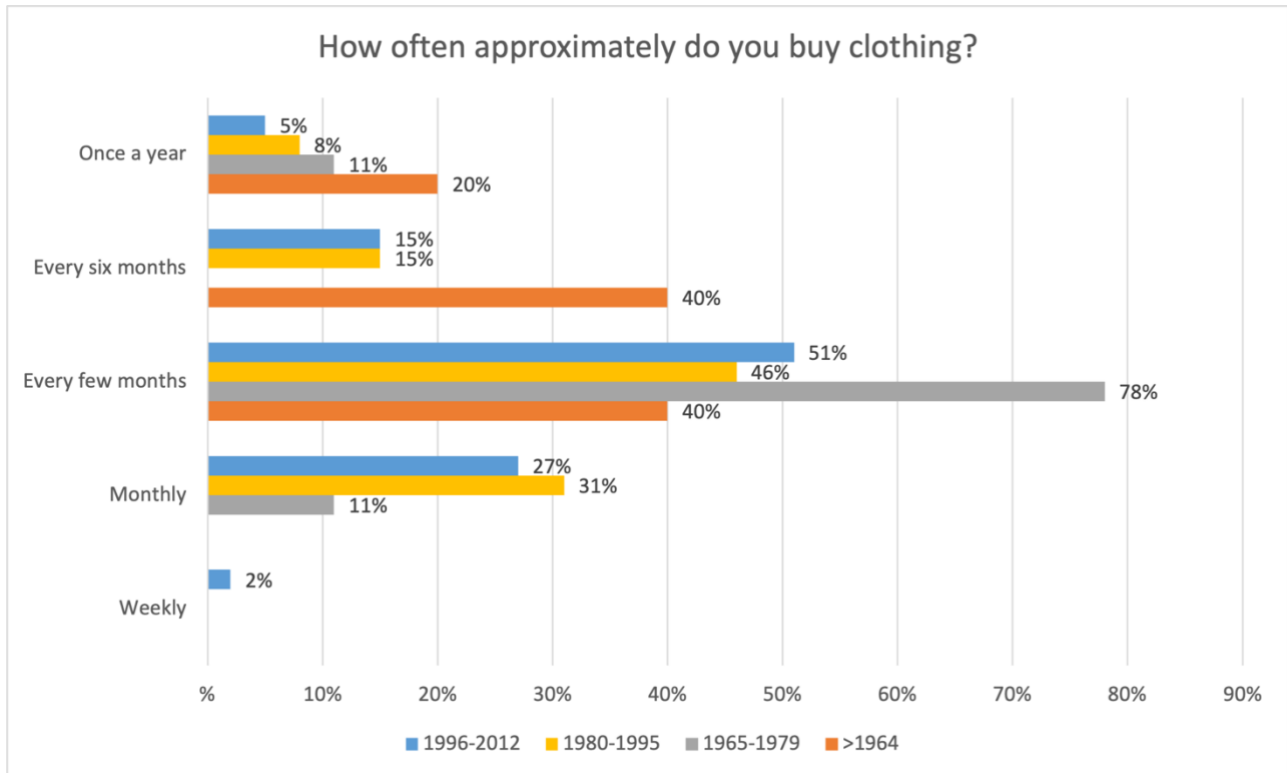


Figure 9. Respondents' answers to how often approximately they buy clothing. (n = 68)

Most respondents from all generations answered that they buy clothing every few months, except for respondents born before 1964, who answered that they buy clothing every few months and every six months equally. This question was meant to understand how actively consumers participate in the fashion market. More frequent buyers may be more exposed to brand messaging of CSR practices and have a higher environmental impact due to consumption frequency.

While the generations were quite evenly distributed on their purchasing frequency, the only generation that purchased clothing weekly was those born between 1996 and 2012. This generation was also the only one that stated they did not find any CSR aspect important in Figure 8 for IQ 2. The answers were both at 2%. This could indicate that for a small part of this generation, consumerism or keeping up with the latest trends takes priority over sustainability.

Respondents were then asked on a Likert scale how much more likely they are to trust a brand that is transparent about their CSR practices.

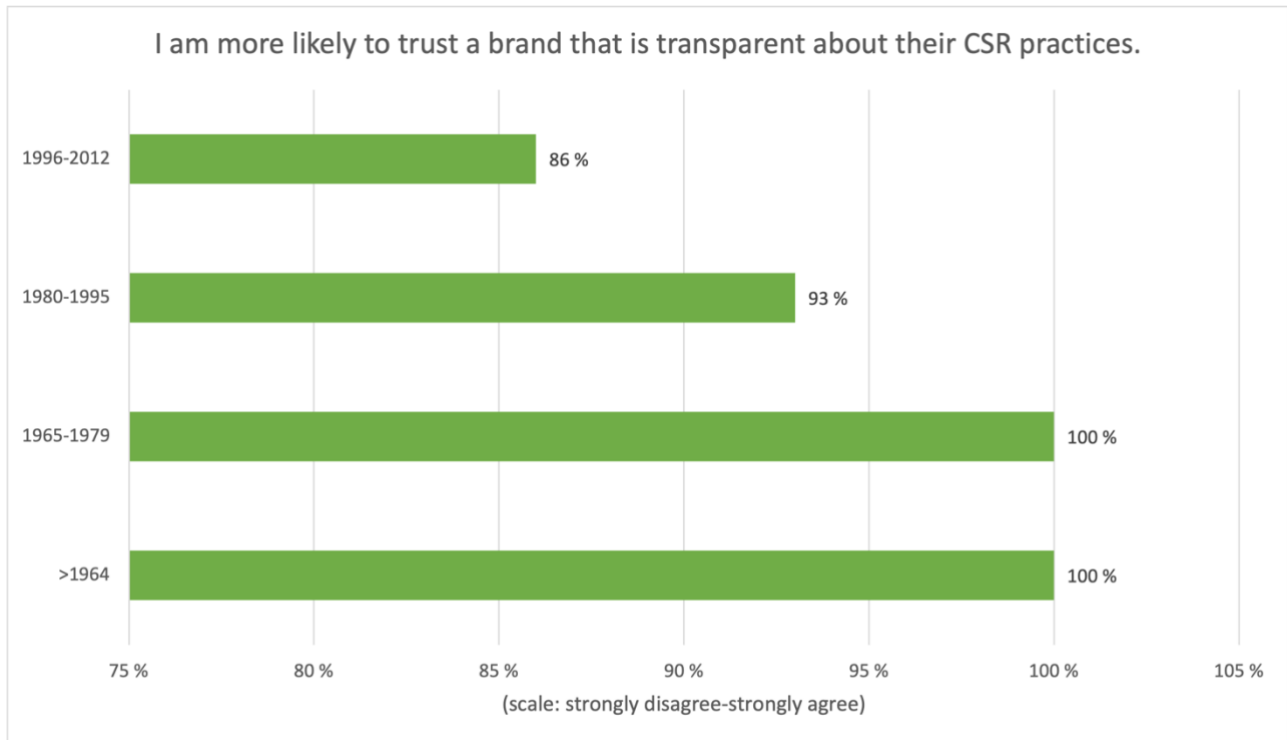


Figure 10. Respondents' answers to whether they are more likely to trust a brand that is transparent about its CSR practices. (n = 68)

The two oldest generations, respondents born between 1964 to 1979, all agreed that they would be more likely to trust a brand that is transparent about their CSR practices. In contrast, the two youngest generations, born between 1980 and 2012, were less likely to trust a brand even though it was transparent about CSR. This could show how younger generations are more aware of greenwashing and thus more wary of brand communication. Still, the results indicated that all generations would be more likely to trust a brand that is transparent about its CSR practices, just to varying degrees.

Next, the respondents were asked, using a Likert scale, whether they would be more likely to purchase clothing from a brand that is transparent about its CSR practices.

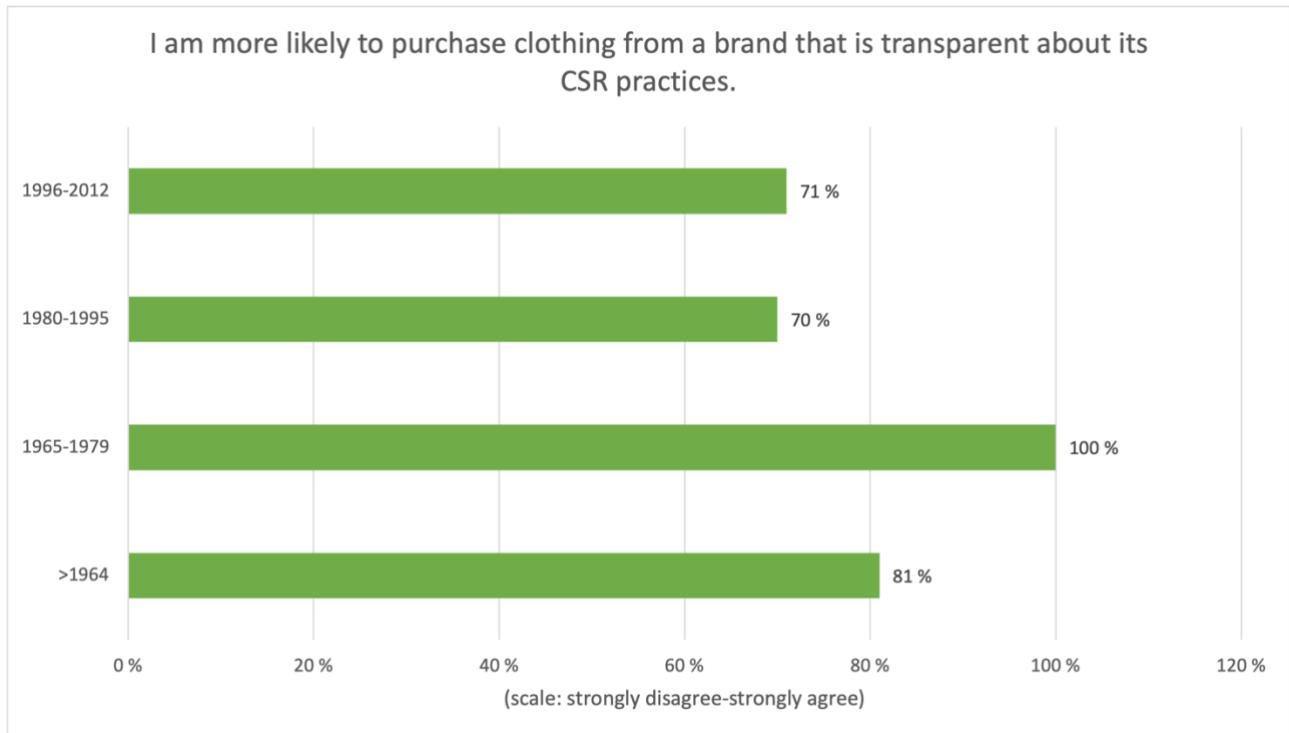


Figure 11. Respondents' answers to how much more likely they are to purchase clothing from a brand that is transparent about its CSR practices. (n = 68)

As mentioned in the theoretical framework of this thesis, consumers are more inclined to purchase from companies with positive CSR reputations (Haski-Leventhal 2022, 8). However, the existing research did not clarify how different consumer segments vary in their willingness to purchase clothing from companies with positive or negative CSR reputations. This was stated as a research gap that this thesis aims to address.

This question seemed to have more variation in answers compared to the previous question. The only age group to completely agree was respondents born between 1965-1979. The two youngest generations, born between 1980-2012, were the most hesitant to state that they would be more willing to purchase clothing from a brand that was transparent about its CSR practices. There could be multiple reasons for this finding. The younger generations might have less disposable income when compared to their older counterparts and may have to resort to purchasing from fast fashion companies for that reason. They might also be more aware of greenwashing, as found in Figure 10 and the second question in IQ 2, and thus more wary of purchasing from brands that communicate about their CSR practices.

Regardless, most responses across all generations leaned toward being more likely to purchase from a brand that is transparent about its CSR initiatives, further supporting prior knowledge on the subject by Haski-Leventhal (2022, 8). However, younger generations seemed more wary, which

suggests that companies should take extra care in how they communicate and market their CSR practices to those age groups to ensure authenticity and avoid perceptions of greenwashing. As stated in findings by Edelman Earned Brand (2018, 5-11), one in two people are belief-driven buyers. Of those buyers, 65% will not purchase products from a company because it stayed silent on an issue, they felt it had an obligation to address. According to the respondents of this survey, over one in two people are belief-driven buyers.

The last question for IQ 3 was asking the respondents' willingness to pay more for clothing that was ethically produced. This was measured using a Likert scale.

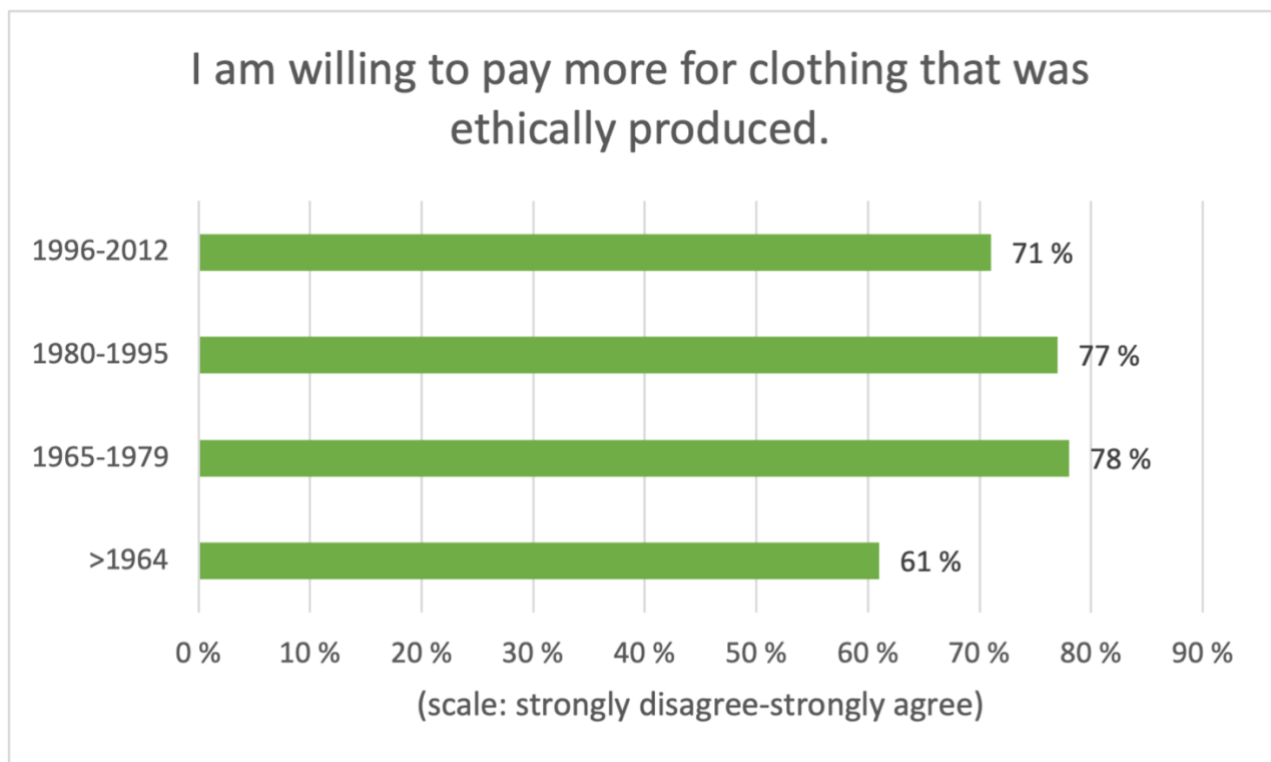


Figure 12. Respondents' answers to how willing they are to pay more for clothing that was ethically produced. (n = 68)

The group least likely to pay for more ethically produced clothing was the oldest, born before 1964, at just 61%. When this group was asked whether they would be more likely to purchase clothing from a brand that was transparent about its CSR practices, 81% would be more likely. However, when asked whether they would be more willing to pay more for ethically produced clothing, only 61% answered that they would be willing. As referred to in the theoretical framework of this thesis, this phenomenon is also known as the sustainable consumption gap (Szmigin & Piacentini 2022, 487).

This suggests that while older generations may value ethical brands in principle, they are less willing to pay a higher price for such clothing. A similar decline in willingness to pay more was observed across all generations, except the youngest group, born between 1996 and 2012. This generation was the only one that indicated both a greater likelihood of purchasing from a brand that is transparent about its CSR practices and a willingness to pay more for ethically produced clothing. This aligns with prior research on the topic, as stated by Lowe (2023, 12), younger generations are increasingly aware of social and environmental causes and tend to seek fashion that supports those causes.

However, there was a contradiction in the younger generation's willingness to pay more for ethically produced clothing, while also purchasing clothing more frequently, as reported in Figure 9. This may suggest that there is a conflict between sustainable ideology and purchasing behaviour.

Transparency in CSR increased trust in all generations. However, the only generation consistent in trust, purchasing from, and paying more for transparent CSR practices was the youngest, born between 1996 and 2012. This may indicate that fashion companies should choose this generation as their primary target market if they focus on ethical CSR practices.

#### **4.4 IQ 4**

IQ 4 was addressed using mixed methods. This research question, how should companies market the CSR aspects important to each generation, was explored through quantitative questions, supported by reasoning drawn from qualitative responses.

The first question respondents were asked, using a Likert scale, was whether they were interested in learning more about fashion companies' CSR practices. This question had the possibilities of answering yes, no, or maybe.

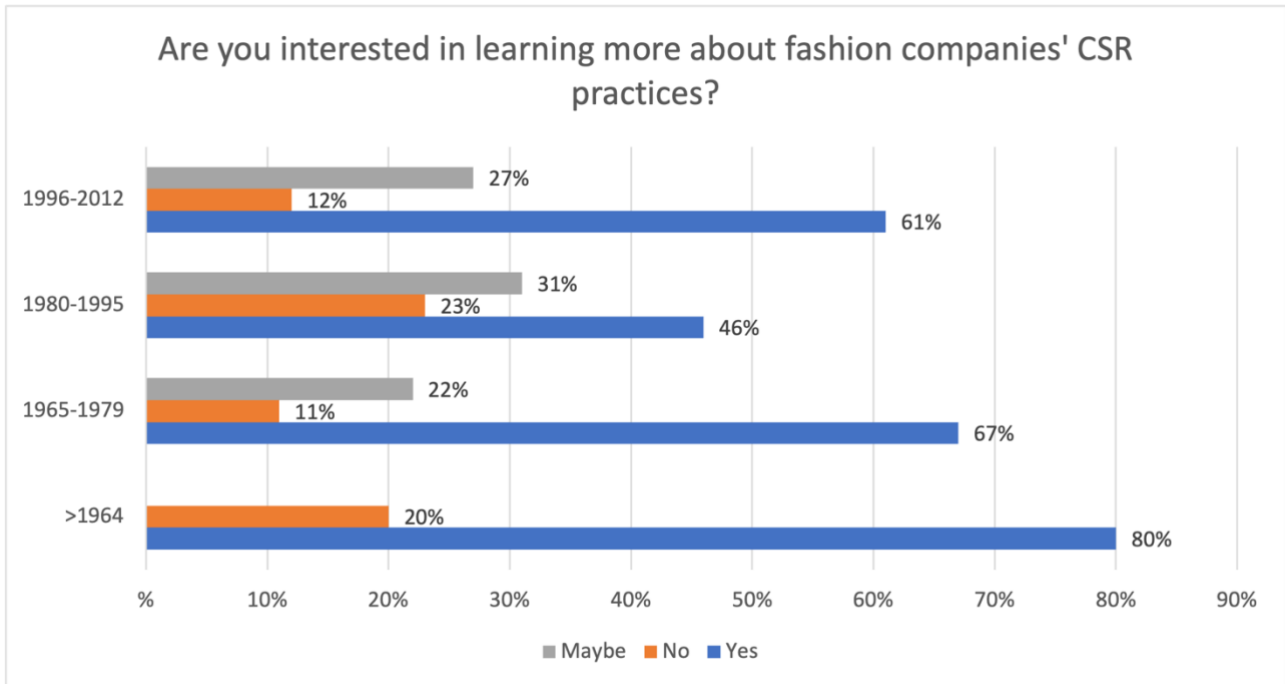


Figure 13. Respondents' answers to whether they are interested in learning more about fashion companies' CSR practices. (n = 68)

Most respondents, regardless of age, chose that they are interested in learning more about fashion companies' CSR practices. This supports the claim made by Golob and Podnar (2019, 69), as referenced in the theoretical framework of this thesis, that 88% of global consumers express interest in learning more about the CSR practices of companies.

The overwhelmingly most common answer among respondents born before 1964 was that they would like to learn more about CSR practices. This was also the generation that had the least distribution of answers in Figure 7 when asked about where they find information about CSR practices. This could mean that there is a segment for companies to make their CSR practices better known for that generation, because they are interested in learning more than they currently can, through word-of-mouth, news, and the brand's advertising and marketing. This is also referred to as the information deficit model. It supports prior research by Szmigin and Piacentini (2022, 487).

Another finding from this data set was that the answer option "maybe" was more common in all generations when compared to the answer option "no". This means that those respondents could possibly still be swayed by companies towards an increase in knowledge about CSR. If the respondents value CSR, an increase in their knowledge of the subject could sway their purchasing behaviour in a positive direction toward the company.

To follow up on this, the respondents were asked how they would like to receive information about CSR practices. This was executed using multiple-choice questions.

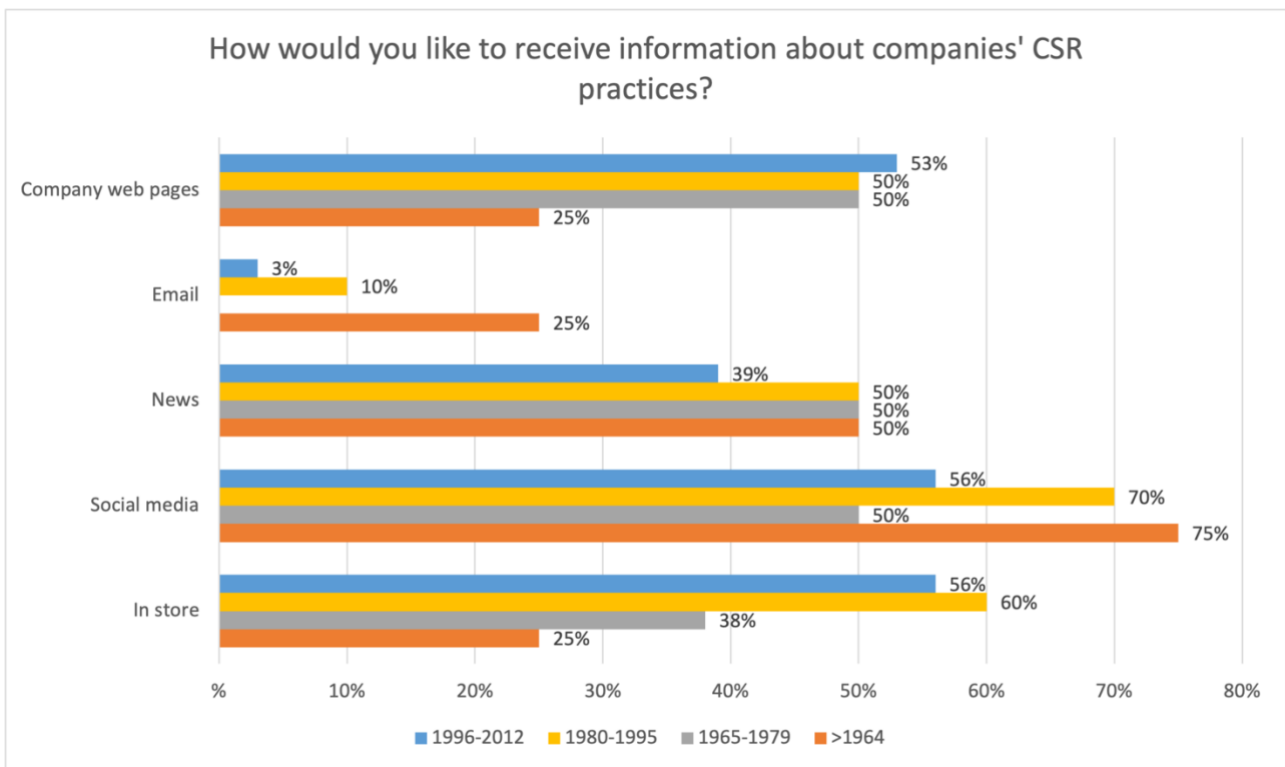


Figure 14. Respondents' answers to how they would like to receive information about companies' CSR practices. (n = 121)

The data showed that social media was the most preferred channel across all generations. News was particularly favoured by the older generations, while company websites were preferred by the three youngest generations. The youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, preferred in-store communication along with social media and company websites. Email was the least favoured option among respondents from all generations.

These findings suggest that companies should prioritize social media as their primary channel for communicating their CSR practices, as it resonates with all age groups. If the company's target market is older consumers, incorporating traditional news media may be beneficial. Ensuring that CSR communication is easily accessible on company websites can help engage consumers from many generations.

Finally, the respondents were asked a qualitative question on whether they believe it matters if a company's CSR practices are driven by genuine values or the hope of a positive public image.

The respondents born before 1964 and between 1980 and 1995 mostly answered that it did matter whether CSR practices were being driven by genuine values. This was reasoned by it being sustainable in the long term only if it was genuine. However, some respondents disagreed, stating

*“That depends entirely on How the company handles these practices: the reasons Behind a company's "positive practices is, in reality, completely immaterial. Actions speak louder than words; if the actions of a company are good, the reasons behind those actions do not really matter in the grand scheme of things. In a perfect world? Of course they Should matter! But we don't live in a perfect world, do we?”.*

The respondent raises a valid point: while in an ideal scenario, companies would be motivated by genuine values, one could argue that if ethical CSR practices are being implemented, the lack of authenticity may not diminish their positive impact.

The respondents born between 1965 and 1979 and 1996 and 2012 varied more in their views. A respondent born between 1996 and 2012 stated

*“Yes, it does matter. When CSR practices are driven by genuine values, they are more likely to be consistent, impactful, and foster trust among stakeholders. On the other hand, if CSR is motivated solely by the hope of a positive public image, it risks appearing insincere or performative, which could lead to skepticism and erode trust. Authenticity ensures long-term benefits for both the company and society.”.*

The respondents' answers showed that while CSR is important across generations, how companies should communicate it varies. Social media emerged as a preferred channel across generations, while older generations showed a preference for the news. Company websites were favoured by the three youngest generations. Email was consistently the least preferred channel across all age groups.

While all generations showed an interest in learning more about CSR, their preferences for channels and opinions on the companies' motives differed. This data suggests that companies should tailor their messaging and channels based on which generation they are targeting. Regardless of their target market, companies must come across as authentic and consistent in their communication of CSR to build trust with consumers.

## 5 Conclusions

This chapter works as a summary of the primary research conducted for this thesis, as well as answering the research question, “How do corporate social responsibility practices in the fashion industry influence the consumer behaviour of different generations?”. This chapter will also include recommendations for future research, reliability and relevance, and reflections on the thesis process.

### 5.1 Key findings

In IQ 1, “How do consumers from different generations research the CSR practices of fashion companies?”, quantitative methods were used. The results showed that respondents born between 1965-1979 were the most likely to consider fashion companies’ CSR practices before purchasing clothing from them. The youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, considered CSR nearly as much. The oldest group of respondents considered CSR the least. When asked where respondents found information on CSR, the most answered categories were news and media, the brand's advertising and marketing, and word-of-mouth.

IQ 2 was “What aspects of CSR do consumers from each generation consider important?”, and it was answered with mixed methods. The survey results indicated that the most important factors by far for all generations were ethical labour practices and environmental sustainability. The least important aspect for all generations was community engagement.

When asked what they consider to be a company’s most important responsibility, common answers included transparency, ethical labour practices, and protecting the environment as much as possible. Especially the youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, emphasized the importance of transparency in the supply chain, while the older generations focused on a net-neutral approach where the company should not harm people or the planet through their production.

On a similar note, respondents considered that companies should not maximise profit if it comes at the expense of ethical labour practices and sustainability. However, some respondents considered there to be circumstances where compromises are needed, and another stated that startups should not be held to the same CSR standards as large corporations.

In IQ 3, “How do different aspects affect purchase behaviour?”, quantitative methods were utilized. The results found that respondents were more likely to trust a company if it was transparent about its CSR practices, but only the youngest generation, born between 1996 and 2012, were equally as ready to pay more for such clothing. The two youngest generations, born between 1980-2012,

bought clothing the most often, monthly and every few months, while the older generations only bought clothing every few months to once every six months.

IQ 4 was “How should companies market the CSR aspects important to each generation?” and mixed methods were used to answer it. Most respondents, regardless of age, stated that they would be interested in learning more about fashion companies’ CSR practices. Especially respondents born before 1964 were very interested in learning more about CSR, which could open a segment for companies to market their CSR practices. The answer option “maybe” was more common in all generations, when compared to the answer option “no”, meaning that respondents could be open to being marketed CSR aspects if done correctly.

When considering where respondents would like to learn more about CSR, social media rose as the most popular. News was particularly favoured by the older generations, while company websites were preferred by the three youngest generations. Email was consistently the least preferred channel across all age groups.

Finally, the respondents were asked a qualitative question on whether they believe it matters if a company’s CSR practices are driven by genuine values or the hope of a positive public image. The respondents born before 1964 and between 1980 and 1995 mostly answered that it did matter whether CSR practices were being driven by genuine values, as they would only be sustainable in the long term if they were genuine. The respondents born between 1965-1979, and 1996 and 2012, varied more in their answers, some considering it indifferent whether the actions were genuine, if they happened.

For companies, these are clear indicators that CSR communication and marketing need to be customized according to the target market. An effective strategy could include multiple channels, social media for a wide reach, news, and other media to engage older generations, and ensuring CSR content is easily available on their sites.

Regardless of the target market, it is important to ensure communication is consistent and prevent accusations of greenwashing. This is likely to harbour trust from consumers, while genuinely promoting CSR practices and initiatives.

## **5.2 Reliability and relevance**

The reliability of this research was supported through a consistent survey structure and the use of standardized Likert scale questions, which allowed for uniform evaluation of respondents’ answers across generations. The survey questions were presented to the respondents in the same order to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. The respondents’ answers were exported from the online

survey platform Webropol to Excel, without any interference with the answers. In Excel, they were made into figures.

The dataset was unbalanced, due to receiving more answers from the 1996 to 2012 generation compared to others. Since the number of respondents, 69, was relatively low, the reliability of the research may not be entirely accurate.

The relevance of this research-based thesis lies in its generational comparisons. There have been several studies conducted on consumer attitudes and behaviours concerning CSR, however, there has been a research gap on the generational differences and the views of older generations. This thesis focused on the impact of CSR on consumer behaviour in the fashion industry and how companies should communicate CSR across generations.

The topic is timely, due to the increase in sustainability and CSR-related discussion in the fashion industry.

### **5.3 Suggestions for future research**

Future research endeavours could focus on the contradictions this research and previous studies showed. For example, Rath et al. (2015, 161) indicated that especially millennial consumers consider CSR practices that directly affect their communities as important. The research conducted for this thesis showed that millennial consumers placed it as second to last in order of importance. They found ethical labour practices and environmental sustainability to be most important instead.

Another area of future research could be about how to sway the group of consumers who answered that they might be willing to learn more about the CSR practices of fashion companies, as indicated in Figure 13. If consumers are interested in CSR practices, it could sway their purchasing behaviour in a positive direction toward the companies implementing those practices.

### **5.4 Reflection on thesis process**

The thesis process has been tremendously insightful. It has helped deepen the understanding of CSR overall, especially within the complexities of the fashion industry. Throughout the research, it became clear how differently generations view CSR and thus, how difficult it is to predict consumer behaviour. Utilizing mixed methods research, especially qualitative data, was challenging but offered a unique perspective and depth to the research. The results were rewarding. Special appreciation is extended to the survey respondents who took the time to provide thoughtful responses and make the research possible.

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## **7 Appendices**

### **7.1 Appendix 1. Survey questions**

## The role of CSR on consumer behaviour in the fashion industry

Pakolliset kysymykset merkitty tähdellä (\*)

Thank you for participating in this survey! Your answers are valuable in helping us understand how CSR affects consumer behavior in the fashion industry. There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible.

The survey takes just a few minutes. All answers will remain anonymous and will be used solely for research in a bachelor's thesis.

### 1. Do you consent to your answers being collected and used in a bachelors thesis?

\*

- Yes
- No

### 2. Please select the bracket that includes your birth year. \*

- >1964
- 1965-1979
- 1980-1995
- 1996-2012

### 3. How often approximately do you buy clothing? \*

- Weekly
- Monthly
- Every few months
- Every six months
- Once a year

For the validity of this research, I will define CSR so that everyone has an equal understanding of the terminology used in this survey. CSR stands for Corporate Social Responsibility. It means society and consumers' economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations toward companies. Some common themes of CSR in the fashion industry are ensuring safe working conditions, reducing the volume of fast fashion being produced, maximizing product circularity, and sustainable production.

**4. To what extent do you consider a clothing brand's CSR practices before buying from them? \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely

**5. Where do you find information about a clothing brand's CSR practices? \***

- Reports
- Social media
- News and media
- Reviews
- Word-of-mouth (e.g. friends and family)
- Brand's own advertising and marketing
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**6. What factors of fashion CSR do you find especially important? \***

- Environmental sustainability (e.g. use of eco-friendly materials, low carbon footprint)
- Ethical labour practices (e.g. fair wages, safe working conditions)
- Cruelty-free production (animal welfare)
- Community engagement (e.g. local partnerships, charity)
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- None

**7. Are you interested in learning more about fashion companies' CSR practices? \***

- Yes

- No  
 Maybe

**8. How would you like to receive information about companies' CSR practices?**

- In store  
 Social media  
 News  
 Email  
 Company web pages

**9. I am more likely to trust a brand that is transparent about their CSR practices.**

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

**10. I am more likely to purchase clothing from a brand that is transparent about its CSR practices. \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

**11. I am willing to pay more for clothing that was ethically produced. \***

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

**12. Please rank the following factors based on their importance to you when making clothing purchase decisions. (1=most important, 5=least important)**

	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
Social aspects (e.g. sociopolitical activism, charity)	<input type="radio"/> 3
	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5
	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
Ethical production	<input type="radio"/> 3
	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5
	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
Trends	<input type="radio"/> 3
	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5
	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
Convenience (e.g. easy access, store location)	<input type="radio"/> 3
	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5
	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
Price	<input type="radio"/> 3
	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5

**13. What do you believe to be a company's most important responsibility? \***

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**14. Do you believe a company should prioritize maximizing profit, even if it comes at the expense of ethical labour practices and sustainability? Please specify why. \***

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**15. Do you believe it matters whether a company's CSR practices are driven by genuine values or the hope of a positive public image? Please specify why. \***

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