



Analysis of the key drivers and
sustainability impact on Sneaker Purchase
Decisions among Italian Gen Z

Pier Mario Allodi

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Rita

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ABSTRACT

Title: Analysis of the key drivers and sustainability impact on Sneaker Purchase Decisions among Italian Gen Z

Author: Pier Mario Allodi

The master thesis explores the most relevant factors that drive consumer decisions when it is to buy new sneakers. The research problem aims to identify these factors to provide insights on a potential new model far from the current unsustainable practices of the fashion industry today. The literature review covers five main areas: the current situation of the fashion industry, the impact of the sneakers industry and the sustainable innovation in the sneaker market, an overview of the Italian Gen Z, the consumer behavior in regard to sneakers. Subsequently, it focuses on the perception of sustainability within the sneakers industry and the reasons behind it. The study uses a qualitative and quantitative approach, with data collected through interviews with Gen Z consumers and an online survey. The findings highlight the importance of price, brand and aesthetics for Gen Z consumers, who are starting also to assess eco-friendly practices. The study suggests that sustainable innovation might be crucial for the sneaker market to address the sustainability challenges of the fashion industry and meet the demands of Gen Z consumers, even if it is far from reaching its full potential.

Keywords: consumer decisions, sneakers, fashion industry, Italian Gen Z, consumer behavior, perception of sustainability, price, brand, sustainable innovation

RESUMO

Titulo: “Análise dos principais impulsionadores e do impacto da sustentabilidade nas decisões de compra de Sneakers entre a geração Z italiana.

Autor: Pier Mario Allodi

A tese de mestrado explora os fatores mais relevantes que impulsionam as decisões dos consumidores na hora de comprar novos sneakers. O problema de pesquisa tem como objetivo fornecer insights sobre um potencial novo modelo distante das práticas insustentáveis atuais da indústria da moda. A revisão da literatura abrange cinco áreas principais: a situação atual da indústria da moda, o impacto da indústria de tênis e a inovação sustentável no mercado de tênis, uma visão geral da Geração Z italiana, o comportamento do consumidor em relação aos sneakers. Em seguida, concentra-se na percepção da sustentabilidade dentro da indústria de sneakers. O estudo utiliza uma abordagem qualitativa e quantitativa, com dados coletados por meio de entrevistas com consumidores da Geração Z e uma pesquisa online. Os resultados destacam a importância do preço, marca e estética para os consumidores da Geração Z, que estão começando a avaliar também as práticas ecologicamente corretas. O estudo sugere que a inovação sustentável pode ser crucial para o mercado de tênis enfrentar os desafios de sustentabilidade da indústria da moda e atender às demandas dos consumidores da Geração Z, mesmo que ainda esteja longe de alcançar seu potencial total.

Palavra chaves: decisões do consumidor, tênis, indústria da moda, Geração Z italiana, comportamento do consumidor, percepção de sustentabilidade, preço, marca, inovação sustentável

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research objectives

The footwear business is a significant segment of the fashion and lifestyle market, and the sneaker industry is a considerable contributor to the global footwear market. In contemporary times, there has been a growing concern for sustainable and innovative design strategies in sneaker production, with encouraging stress on environmentally friendly and socially responsible manufacturing methods. However, despite the growing attractiveness of sustainable and innovative design strategies, there has been limited investigation into the thoughts and behaviors of Italian Gen Z consumers toward these developments.

The Gen Z unit is considered one of the most valuable target markets for the sneaker industry due to its impact on mainstream culture, purchasing capacity, and sustainability concerns. Gen Z consumers are known for their preference for environmentally friendly goods and their willingness to pay a bonus for sustainable products. Nevertheless, not much is known about their attitudes and behaviors toward sustainable sneakers, particularly in the Italian market. Consequently, there is a need to explore the opinions and inclinations of Italian Gen Z purchasers about eco-friendly shoes in the sneaker industry.

This lack of knowledge had to be filled in for several reasons. Primarily, it can support intuitions into the preferences and purchasing behaviors of this relevant customer segment, which can help sneaker enterprises design and market their goods more successfully. Secondly, it can contribute to the growth of sustainable and socially responsible manufacturing procedures in the sneaker industry, which can have a positive impact on the environment and society. Finally, it can help legislators and industry stakeholders appreciate the role of sustainable design strategies in footwear production and their possible impact on the economy and society.

The primary goal of this research is to explore the perceptions and preferences of Italian Gen Z shoppers about sustainable design strategies and other key factors when it is to purchasing new sneakers.

1.2 Research questions

In particular, the primary objective of this study is to have a full overview of the most important factors for Italian Gen Z consumers when they are purchasing sneakers, understand the potential

value of sustainability in the industry, and define the user profiles of sustainable sneakers. This analysis will be guided by the question:

- *'What are the key factors for Italian Gen Z consumers driving their purchasing decisions about Sneakers?'*

This research question will focus on the most important features that influence this generation in regard to the buying choices of shoes. Considering the potential broadness of alternatives, the study will focus on the most relevant three.

The second question that will drive this analysis is:

- *How is sustainability perceived within the sneakers industry by Italian Gen Z?*

Through this question, the study aims to move the focus to the sustainability aspect and analyze which is the importance of sustainability when Gen Z consumers choose to buy sneakers.

The analysis will then try to answer the question:

- *Is Italian Gen Z willing to pay a premium price for sustainable sneakers?*

Finally, the study will focus on the consumer user profile for sustainable sneakers to understand what the characteristics of this subgroup are.

By investigating these research questions, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and behaviors of Italian Gen Z consumers towards normal and sustainable sneakers. This information can be useful for companies and policymakers who are interested in promoting sustainable fashion practices and developing effective marketing strategies for sustainable sneaker products.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

The fashion industry is facing increasing stress both from final consumers and stakeholders to deal with sustainability difficulties, linked to decreasing waste, carbon emissions, and immoral labor procedures. The sneaker industry, in particular, has been pointed out as a huge contributor to environmental destruction and human rights cruelties. Many firms have lost important segments of the market due to the high critics for their unsustainable practices. However, in recent times, firms have started to discover new design strategies and technologies that aim to produce more sustainable products, including sneakers. Even if the products are in the market the acceptance of these goods by consumers continues to be a challenge. For this reason, this

analysis seeks to know which are the key factors that drive Italian Gen Z consumers to buy sneakers and which and how sustainability plays a role in these decisions.

1.3.1 The Theoretical Rationale of the Study

The study develops the current literature on sustainable fashion and consumer behavior, with a focus on the sneaker industry. Sustainable fashion is a growing area of research, driven by the increasing recognition of the environmental and social impacts of the fashion industry. The idea of sustainable fashion includes a range of practices and projects aimed at reducing the negative impacts of fashion production and consumption, including the use of sustainable materials, ethical labor practices, and reducing waste and emissions.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in sustainable fashion among consumers, particularly younger consumers who are more environmentally and socially conscious. The Gen Z population, born between 1997 and 2012, is a key target market for the fashion industry, and their attitudes and behaviors toward sustainability are fundamental if companies want to be relevant for these new shoppers.

Sneakers are one of the most popular and profitable fashion products globally, but they are also one of the most environmentally damaging due to the use of non-renewable materials and unsustainable production practices. However, there have been recent efforts by sneaker companies to adopt more sustainable practices and technologies, such as the use of recycled materials and renewable energy sources.

While these efforts are admirable, the adoption of sustainable design strategies by consumers remains a challenge. Previous research, such as the chapter '*An Exploration of Consumers' Perceptions Towards Sustainable Fashion – A Qualitative Study in the UK*' from Sustainability in Fashion book (Zhen Lai, 2017) has shown that consumers prioritize other factors, such as price, aesthetics and brand image, over sustainability considerations when making purchasing decisions. Additionally, there may be barriers to the adoption of sustainable fashion, such as a lack of availability, limited choice, or a perceived trade-off between sustainability and style.

Consequently, this research pursues to focus on these gaps in the literature by examining what Italian Gen Z consumers perceive as important regarding sneakers and how they value the new sustainable design options. The study aims to offer insights into the drivers and obstacles to the acceptance of sustainable sneakers in the Italian market. The study also contributes to the broader literature on sustainable fashion and consumer behavior, providing insights into the

attitudes and behaviors of younger consumers toward sustainability and brand strategies in the fashion industry.

1.3.2 The Practical Rationale of the Study

The study has practical propositions for companies working in the sneaker industry, especially those involved in building sustainable products and marketing strategies that resonate with the values and predilections of Italian Gen Z shoppers. By understanding the drivers of consumer behavior in this market, firms can make advised choices about product design, pricing, and marketing strategies. For example, the research may show that Italian Gen Z consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainable sneakers, suggesting that companies should concentrate on sustainability in their product design and share the environmental and social benefits of their goods with consumers. On the other hand, the study may identify other causes, such as brand image or social norms, as more critical drivers of consumer behavior, indicating that businesses should emphasize creating a strong brand identity and leveraging social influence to promote sustainability.

Finally, the report has wider implications for the fashion industry as a whole, emphasizing the importance of knowing consumer feelings and behaviors about sustainability and the part of different factors in shaping these attitudes and actions. By adding value to the academic literature on sustainable fashion and consumer behavior, the study can advise future exploration and policy progress in this field, in the long run leading to more sustainable and ethical practices in the fashion industry.

1.4 Study limitations

The Study's focus on Italian Gen Z consumers may not fully represent the attitudes and behaviors of other consumer groups in different regions or cultures. Therefore, it may not be possible to generalize the findings of this study to other populations. Also, the study will rely on self-reported data from consumers, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability bias or response bias. Finally, the study's reliance on surveys and interviews may limit the depth of the data collected, as participants may not be able to fully articulate their attitudes and perceptions. Despite these limitations, this study still provides valuable insights into the attitudes and behaviors of Italian Gen Z consumers towards sustainable fashion and can serve as a basis for future research on this topic.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to explore the existing body of research regarding the key purchase drivers for Italian Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers, with an additional peculiar focus on sustainable sneakers to understand how this factor is perceived and examine the potential user profile. This is driven by an analysis of relevant academic articles, market reports, and consumer studies.

2.1. Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry has been recognized as one of the foremost contaminating businesses in the world, with its negative environmental impact coming from the creation, utilization, and disposal processes (Ellen MacArthur Foundation , 2017) . The industry is a market worth 1.3 trillion and its impact is mostly due to the utilization of non-renewable assets, high energy consumption, and waste generation, with the United Nations Environmental Programme evaluating that the fashion industry accounts for 10% of worldwide carbon outflows and 20% of worldwide wastewater (United Nations Environment Programme, 2018)

In reaction to these challenges, numerous fashion brands are considering maintainable practices to decrease their environmental impact. Sustainable fashion has been characterized as "clothing, shoes, and accessories that are made, promoted, and utilized within the most eco-friendly way possible, taking into consideration both natural and socio-economic perspectives (Fletcher, 2012). Sustainable fashion practices include the utilization of eco-friendly materials, the diminishment of waste, the advancement of circular economy principles, and moral labor habits.

Sustainable fashion is picking up force within the fashion industry, with a developing number of brands using eco-friendly techniques. In specific, the utilization of green materials has gained attention in recent times. These materials incorporate reused polyester, natural cotton, TENCEL™ lyocell, and bamboo. The adoption of these resources diminishes the ecological impact of fashion production by reducing the utilization of non-renewable assets and the creation of waste (Gwilt).

Not only the use of green materials but also, the fashion industry, is studying circular economy applications to reduce trash generation and increment the life span of items. Circular economy standards point to a closed-loop framework, where the life of the assets is maximized, together with minimizing waste and reusing materials (Ellen MacArthur Foundation , 2017). The

adoption of circular economy principles within the fashion industry includes techniques such as planning for robustness, repairing, and restoring items, and pushing second-hand markets.

Regardless of the momentum that green fashion gained; the adoption of eco-friendly practices isn't without its challenges. Financial variables such as cost, specific variables such as the accessibility of sustainable materials and technologies, and social variables such as customer behavior and attitudes towards sustainability, have been distinguished as boundaries to the spread of green practices (Fletcher, 2012)

2.2. The Sneaker Industry's Impact and the new sustainable Designs

The footwear business plays a large role in the fashion industry's environmental impact. Sneaker production involves various materials such as rubber, leather, synthetic fibers, and plastics that are unrecyclable. Also, the production process requires large quantities of energy and water, resulting in carbon emissions and water pollution. To give an appropriate context, according to a Carbon Trust study, one sneaker production emits approximately 14.6 kg of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e), which is equivalent to driving a car 50 km (Carbon Trust, 2021). Additionally, the production of leather and synthetic fabrics ends often in the sea causing significant water pollution, ecological damage, and health risks to communities near production sites (WWF, 2021). Not only do pieces of production end up in oceans and the sea but also discarded sneakers. They are made of non-biodegradable synthetic materials which means that they won't decompose in a landfill and due to the lifespan of these products, the amount of badly disposed sneakers is incredibly high. According to the United Nations, approximately 300 million tons of plastic waste are generated worldwide each year, of which only nine are recycled (United Nations, 2021). The last aspect to take into consideration for the sneakers industry is the pace of the industry, due to the competition and the market circumstances, sneakers are considered a fast fashion product, easily replaceable and changeable in case something happens. Companies are making their profit from the scaled economies and constantly new items are introduced into the market.

2.3 Gen Z in Italy

Generation Z is the generation born between Millennials and Generation Alpha, this cohort includes people born between 1997 and 2012 and is commonly named Gen Z or post-millennial generation. Focusing on the Italian situation, this group of individuals is peculiar for its unique demographic social, and cultural characteristics.

Two stand-out characteristics of post-millennials in Italy are their variety and inclusivity connected with their strong digital distinctiveness. The first aspect comes from the society where they grew up that never if compared to previous generations, had a higher proportion of immigrants and individuals with multi-ethnic backgrounds. This has contributed to their more open-minded and tolerant attitudes toward different cultures, lifestyles, and personalities. This aspect was also influenced by the digital connectivity that they had since a young age which made possible a new, larger, world of information in real-time. This opportunity shaped their behaviors, values, and preferences, particularly in terms of their approach to education, work, and consumption. The sum of these two aspects is also reflected in their consumption patterns, as many Gen Z individuals in Italy tend to value authenticity, sustainability, and social responsibility in their purchasing decisions more than in older generations. For this reason, they are more likely to support brands that align with their values and make a positive impact on society and the environment. (Manzini, 2020)

A common trend for Gen Z not only in Italy but also across Europe is the concern regarding sustainability and its impact on the environment, society, and economy. A growing level of awareness of the negative consequences of climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality drives this apprehension. As such, part of Gen Z in Italy is actively involved in finding ways to reduce their ecological footprint and promote sustainable practices in their daily lives. These values move into lifestyle choices such as reducing meat consumption, using public transportation, and recycling.

The post-millennial generation, as shown by different studies, is more likely to support environmentally responsible brands and products, and prefer companies that adopt sustainable practices, such as reducing carbon emissions, minimizing waste, and sourcing ethically (Deloitte, 2019). This inclination is not only driven by ecological worries but also exhibits a wider shift to conscious consumerism, where buyers are more aware of the social and ethical implications of their consumption choices.

Policymakers, Businesses, and educators cannot avoid understanding the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of Gen Z in Italy if they want to successfully engage and meet the demands of this group. Organizations must recognize the challenges and occasions that Gen Z in Italy is facing and only through this way, they can create strategies and offerings to be aligned with Post Millennials' preferences and values. Nevertheless, it is also fundamental to notice

that Gen Z in Italy is not a homogeneous group and that there are significant variations in their behaviors and attitudes based on factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and location.

In conclusion, Gen Z in Italy is a crucial group that is marking an important movement in demographic and social trends compared to previous generations. Their digital literacy, diversity, and way of thinking can be both a challenge and an opportunity for Italy's economy and society. (McKinsey & Company, 2019).

2.4 Consumer Behavior and the key factors driving purchase decisions for Sneakers.

The consumers' behavior when regards to the purchase of sneakers are complex since several relevant factors are taken into consideration by shoppers when they are considering buying these goods (Doroteja Mandarić, 2022). Some of these aspects are relatively new in the industry while some are sedimented over decades and generations. A recent ingredient is social media relevance since consumers more and more look to influencers or their online community for inspiration or guidance, and the digital consistency of these new figures allows them to reach broad audiences (Jin Woo Choi, 2017). Other factors have been settled for decades as the shopping experience, defined by the ability of the seller to satisfy the consumer need for information, or brand loyalty, seen as the tendency of consumers to keep purchasing the same brand because of good previous experiences. Among all these factors we can see as overall the most relevant ones for broad Gen Z audience brand, price, and aesthetics (Ruswanti, 2016).

2.4.1 Brand

The name, reputation, and values of brands are playing a role of extraordinary importance regarding the purchasing behavior of Gen Z shoppers.

This group of people is divided into sub-cultures tied by common interests or bonds. Brands with a strong brand image can tie their image to these subcultures through; a peculiarity of products, such as for instance the flat sole of VANS's shoes for skateboarders, marketing activation over partnership with athletes or musicians, as for instance the endorsement of the new NBA rising star Jayson Tatum with the Jordan brand, or the values they stand for, as Patagonia business structure to be a NoProfit organization which resonates as important for the Subgroup of Gen Z which is contrary to the profit focus companies

Also, brand image is the association between brand and trustworthiness. This becomes relevant since Gen Z consumers tend to evaluate better the sneaker if they know the brand.

In conclusion, the brand image of sneaker companies is one of the most relevant pillars for the purchasing decisions of Gen Z consumers. (Miswanto Muslim, 2020)

2.4.2 Price

Price is another fundamental aspect for Gen Z consumers when they are choosing their new sneakers. Most consumers are price sensitive and the decline price on the affordability and value of the shoe. The roots of this value can be tackled from different aspects. According to (Codacons., 2019) report the last macro-economic situation influenced 70% of households in Italy decreasing their purchase power, this situation invest all the purchases for Italians and sneakers are also part of the group. Another aspect that has been analyzed from (Bhardwaj, 2010) is the fact that in recent years, with the new trend of fast fashion, sneakers have not only become available for cheaper prices but also people are constantly exposed to new trends and new products. This fact creates a new type of consumer who is buying more shoes, but has less budget for a single purchase. The last factor, as mentioned above, is the new digital literacy that defines this generation. Surfing the Web allows consumers to research for the best deal across the market in less time and effort than the classic In-store experience and overcoming the physical barriers. This characteristic exploded with the introduction of social media and smartphones that, as written above, are one peculiarity of Gen Z. (Deloitte, 2019)

2.4.3 Aesthetic

Aesthetics for shoes can be defined as the overall visual appeal of the shoe, including its design, color, materials, and texture. The importance of aesthetics in fashion is embedded in profound reasons. The way of dressing is considered by many as a way of expressing the identity of the self and showing the own individuality. For decades consumers have had the tendency to associate and buy products linked with their self-taste and personality, this bond is particularly strong when it's about fashion goods. (Sirgy, 1982). Sneakers not only are included in this mechanism, but they are one of the most critical aspects of fashion for Gen Z consumers, thanks to the complexity of the piece as the colorway, the materials, and other peculiar features that make it possible for those who wear them to fully express themselves. The aesthetic of the shoes is also part of the full idea of dressing for the person, who usually tends to have a color-balanced outfit, in line with the season, the trends, or personal taste (Garcia). Italians especially are, historically, inclined to give importance to the way of dressing and Italian Gen Z inherited this value (Deloitte, 2019)

2.5 The Value of Sustainability and the buyer profile of sustainable sneakers

Sustainability is one of the values that is gaining more importance for Italian Gen Z. The new shoppers are trying to have less impact on the ecosystem and reduce the consumption of resources of Mother Earth. This trend impacts their life on different aspects and purchase

decisions are heavily influenced. Brands are starting to be aware of this fact and new practices have been developed to reduce the consumption of production activities of the companies. (Deloitte, 2019). Starting from the design of the shoe, an essential point, new silhouettes have been briefed as modular structures; shoes that are created with interchangeable parts in order to replace them when they wear out or are broken without having to throw away the whole shoe. Another example is the material selection since sneakers have been made by a combination of rubber, leather, synthetic fibers, and plastics used which are not green. However, a new selection of substances is being briefed as recycled rubber, organic cotton, and plant-based leather (Zavodna, 2020) and it is starting to populate the market. Another mentionable idea is the end-of-life option, crucial for reducing the impact of the sneakers industry since the number of sneakers disposed in landfills is important and strongly impacts the ecosystem.

Even if it's clear that the production of sneakers requires significant amounts of resources, including raw materials, energy, and water, resulting in a considerable environmental footprint., the adoption of sustainable practices and materials in sneaker production has been relatively low. Gen Z consumers are not driven, as a key factor in their purchasing choices for sneakers by sustainability. This evidence is also backed up by the lack of willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable sneakers (Patrizia Gazzola, 2020)

The adoption of sustainable sneakers had been registered by a subgroup of Gen Z. This subgroup, if divided into singular consumer profiles is shaped by some common traits, including gender and education. Research suggests that both gender and education play significant roles in shaping the preferences and attitudes of consumers toward sustainable products, including sneakers. (Patrizia Gazzola, 2020)

When academic studies analyzed gender, they found out that both males and females are increasingly concerned about sustainable fashion and footwear options, involving eco-friendly sneakers. Nonetheless, there is a difference between males' and females' preferences. Women, for example, tend to have more awareness and consideration for ethical and environmental issues (Patrizia Gazzola, 2020). This is potentially translatable into a greater interest in sustainable sneakers. On the other hand, males may prioritize factors such as style, performance, and brand reputation when considering sustainable sneaker options (Sojin Jung, 2016). Brands need to be aware of these gender-related differences in order to enhance marketing strategies and product offerings that successfully can engage both male and female shoppers.

An important role is also played by the level of education when the analysis converts to shaping the consumer profile of sustainable sneakers. Higher levels of education are often associated with greater awareness and concern for sustainability issues, leading to increased demand for eco-friendly products. A positive relationship between education and the intention to buy sustainable fashion items, indicating that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to prioritize sustainability in their purchasing decision field (Sojin Jung, 2016). Additionally, education can enhance consumers' understanding of the environmental impact of the sneaker industry, making them more receptive to sustainable alternatives.

Therefore, the consumer profile of sustainable sneakers indicates that individuals of various genders and higher education levels are more likely to show interest in and prioritize sustainability when making sneaker-purchasing decisions. By recognizing these demographic factors and tailoring their marketing strategies accordingly, sustainable sneaker brands can effectively reach and engage with their target consumers, fostering a positive shift towards more sustainable consumption patterns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis highlights the crucial role of the sneaker industry in contributing to pollution and environmental damage. Although various technological and design solutions have been developed to address this issue, they have yet to gain widespread acceptance in the market, due in part to consumer perceptions and values. This study will investigate further the perceptions of the Italian Gen-Z consumers towards produced footwear, with the aim of identifying potential barriers and opportunities for promoting more sustainable practices in the industry and other factors that are driving consumer shopping choices.

Starting from the research question:

- *'What are the most valuable key factors for Italian Gen Z consumers driving their purchasing decisions about Sneakers?'*

Based on prior research and theory, it is hypothesized that the Gen Z, tends to give high value to brand, price and aesthetics when it is about to buy sneakers. The investigation will also explore on the potential counter side of this hypothesis which foresees the case where these factors are not considered relevant.

Furthermore, based on the willingness to understand more about

- *How is it perceived sustainability within the sneakers industry?*

The research will evaluate the importance of sustainability for Italian Gen Z since, as shown in the literature review, it is still far from being a key factor in the sneakers purchasing decisions of this generation. This is also confirmed by the tendency of Gen Z to not recognize a premium price value to sustainable sneakers. The analysis will dig deeper to understand if the common traits of the female gender and higher level of education are relevant among the subgroup of Italian Gen Z that is interested in sustainable footwear products.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

The investigative plan and strategy for this proposal is a mixed-methods strategy that combines quantitative and qualitative information collection and analysis. This method is considered appropriate because it permits a broader understanding of the research questions and goals.

The first stage of the study will include qualitative information collection through semi-structured consultations with a group of members who show an interest in the sneaker ecosystem. These interviews will dig more profound into the inspirations and reasons behind the respondents' acquiring choices, as well as their selectivity and behaviors towards sustainable design strategies. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face or online and summarized in this paper.

The second stage of the analysis will include the collection of quantitative information via an online questionnaire overview focusing on Italian Gen Z shoppers. The survey will contain closed-ended questions planned to gather data from the respondents' recognitions of sustainable plan techniques in shoes, as well as their obtaining behavior and decision-making forms. The questionnaire will moreover assemble demographical data to better define the context of the respondents and the accuracy of the survey.

In general, this multifaced-methods approach is correct because it permits a more in-depth and complete understanding of the research questions and goals. The outcomes of this paper are projected to enrich the existing literature on consumer preferences within the sneaker industry and educate industry partners, policymakers, and customers on how best to activate sustainable strategies within the industry.

3.2 Data collection methods and Sources

The data collection started with the qualitative research part. This part was structured on 12 interviews which happened both online and offline and lasted an average of 40 minutes. The questions were open-ended, and the interviews were based on the same structure of demands plus some different ones based on the preview answers provided by the guest in order not to distinguish the people interviewed for the most important points but also to be able to dig deeper into aspects that revealed to be relevant. The participants were of different ages and regions but all Italians and belonging to the Gen-Z in order to explore their attitudes and behaviors towards sneakers.

Following the first part, the study presents a quantitative which relied on an online survey to collect data from the target population. The survey was conducted using online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and WhatsApp. On these channels, the survey had been shared among different groups. The questionnaire had also been pre-tested with a small group of students to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions. The total number of respondents is 117 though only 103 had been considered valid. Those not belonging to Gen Z, non-Italians and who have not completed the survey had been excluded from the sample. The questions, in total 15, are structured with close-ended demands, based on a Likert scale from point 1 to point 5, where the value meant respectively 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The first 3 demands investigated on demographic traits of respondents, followed by 5 demands on sneakers in general, and in conclusion 7 questions on sneakers and sustainability. The data have been processed through Python software.

4. Results and analysis

The section presents the outcomes of both the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

4.1 Overview of the Findings from the qualitative interviews

All the interviews supported the hypothesis explained in the thesis. No new hypotheses have been found through the qualitative research methodology, but some interesting new insights emerged from it.

Firstly, all the interviewed people confirmed the fundamental importance of brand image, price, and aesthetics when they are about to buy new sneakers. Regarding brand, it has been associated with different aspects by the guests, for example, a good brand image is a synonym of quality, or cultural relevance, or social acceptance. This depended on the knowledge of brands' systems

and their attachments to styles. Regarding the prices almost all the participants agreed on the relevancy of this point, and it had been narrowed down to 2 main aspects; the actual quality of sneakers which often for mainstream brands doesn't justify the prices and the money constraints that Gen-Z is facing since it is a generation that is entering in the work world now and often is not financially independent. Few attendees pointed out that price might not be a significant factor in the future when they are going to have higher incomes. From one participant price has been listed as relatively important since there is a high demand for hyped sneakers on the secondary market and prices are way higher than resell prices. Regarding aesthetics, it had been confirmed as fundamental by all the consumers. Aesthetics had been defined as the exterior design of the shoe including colors, silhouette, logos, and materials. In terms of aesthetics, the relevancy comes from the broader vision which includes the idea of outfits and how the shoe can match other clothes in the wardrobe. This has relevance for the speakers since through their outfits they show themselves, their personality, and their cultural heritage or belonging.

Secondly, all the interviewed people, are holding a Master's Degree and both Men and Women, expressed awareness and concern about sustainability and their footprint impact. Many participants cited that this awareness is a recent value that is gaining importance in recent years and it's still far from touching its highest point. Also, many participants mentioned the negative impact of fast fashion. Almost all the participants were able to mention sneakers made with sustainable materials but only a few (3 out of 12) had previously purchased sustainable sneakers. Also, only 4 people out of 12 were willing, potentially, to pay a premium price for sustainable shoes. The group of those who were against paying a premium price divided the motivation as a lower quality of materials respect the classic sneakers and the absence of style for sustainable shoes. Additionally, the ones that were open to pay a premium price pointed out that this willingness to pay is present only for local brands since they perceive sustainability as greenwashing from big corporates.

Overall, the qualitative interviews provided valuable insights into the attitudes and behaviors of Italian Gen Z consumers towards sneakers and sustainability. These insights can inform future marketing and product development strategies for sustainable sneaker brands.

4.2 Overview of the Findings from data analysis

Participants have shared their subjective factors rank, so their explicit feedback. Moreover, the study relies on the assumption that the sample is representative of the Italian Gen Z population.

The study will map qualitative customer insights (Extremely important, very important, Slightly important...) into quantitative scores, on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). We will consider responses of 1 and 2 as negative, 4 and 5 as positive and 3 as not relevant.

For the rankings, we have 9 different factors: we will consider 1, 2, 3 as positive, 4, 5, 6 as neutral and 7, 8, 9 as negative.

Regarding the first Research Question:

- *what are the most valuable key factors for Italian Gen Z consumers driving their purchase decisions about sneakers?*

The analysis will begin by checking if the provided factors coincide with what people that took part in the survey consider while looking to buy sneakers.

```
# Others
```

```
df[['Q8_9']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[65]:

```
Q8_9
9.0  0.948454
8.0  0.030928
1.0  0.010309
7.0  0.010309
dtype: float64
```

The result shows that 95% of the users placed other factors on the bottom of their rank: this suggests that the provided factors properly represent the customer's decision process when looking to buy sneaker.

```
# Q8 - Please rank the factors that most resonate with you when you buy sneakers
```

```
# Price
```

```
df[['Q8_1']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[54]:

```
Q8_1
1.0  0.288660
2.0  0.257732
```

```
3.0 0.206186
4.0 0.134021
5.0 0.103093
6.0 0.010309
dtype: float64
```

In [76]:

```
df[['Q6']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[76]:

```
Q6
4 0.525773
3 0.278351
5 0.154639
2 0.030928
1 0.010309
dtype: float64
```

As explicated in the literature review we can state that price is a key driver for the purchase of sneakers for ~75% of customers, also since no person placed price lower than rank 6 (which is our threshold for negative feedback). This is also confirmed by the fact that over 65% of consumers consider price to be a be a main factor (scores 5 and 4), with only 4% of the total sample indicating it as a not relevant feature.

Brand

```
df[['Q8_2']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[55]:

```
Q8_2
2.0 0.195876
3.0 0.195876
5.0 0.195876
4.0 0.164948
1.0 0.123711
6.0 0.113402
9.0 0.010309
dtype: float64
```

In [77]:

```
df[['Q7']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[77]:

```
Q7
4  0.381443
3  0.247423
2  0.185567
5  0.164948
1  0.020619
dtype: float64
```

As previously researched, also the Brand is a factor that seems to be key in the decision process when buying sneakers; over 50% of the sample placed it in top 3, while only 1% placed it at rank 7 or below (this 1% fully belongs to rank 9). We can state that brand seems indeed a key driver when buying sneakers, despite the fact that 20% of people considered it as an unimportant factor when shopping sneakers.

```
# Aesthetics
```

```
df[['Q8_3']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[66]:

```
Q8_3
1.0  0.412371
2.0  0.195876
3.0  0.144330
4.0  0.113402
5.0  0.072165
6.0  0.041237
7.0  0.020619
dtype: float64
```

In [71]:

```
df[['Q5']].value_counts(normalize=True)
```

Out[71]:

```
Q5
4  0.494845
5  0.340206
3  0.123711
2  0.030928
1  0.010309
dtype: float64
```

Also the third hypothesis is confirmed since Aesthetics also plays a significant role in the decision process, with ~75% of consumers placing it in their top 3 most important factors, and only 2% placing it in position 7 or lower. In addition to this, over 80% of consumers consider aesthetics to be important (scores 4 and 5).

The other factors included in the analysis are not considered as much relevant as these three since they are listed in neutral or negative positions. Analyzing one by one shopping experience definitely does not have a key role in the shopping process, as only 3% of customers placed it in their top 3 (positive effect), Endorsers are definitely not a key factor, as only 2% of consumers placed it in top 3 (all in third place) and ~85% ranked it 7th or lower and Sustainability is also a variable that does not positively influence the shopping experience, with only 4% of people placing it in top 3. In a more ambiguous and neutral position, we have comfort which, even though only 12% placed it in rank 7 or lower, just over 40% of customers placed it in the top 3 and quality does not seem to be a significant driver in the shopping process, but 45% of customers placing it in top 3, even though ~50% participants placed it in a neutral position.

Subsequently, the analysis moves the focus to sustainability and the second research question:

- *How is it perceived sustainability within the sneakers industry?*

To understand the sustainability value and the potential consumer profile of sustainable sneakers, the study considers binary classes for categorical consumer features, to assume that they are equally balanced for the Gen Z class only for education:

- The sample is not equally split in terms of gender (73% male)
- 51% of the sample has a Master's degree (class 1, the rest will be class 2).



Figure 1 - Distribution of consumer profiling features

Based on the questions:

- Q9 - How much do you value sustainability?
- Q10 - How much do you value sustainability for sneakers?
- Q11 - Have you ever purchased sustainable sneakers before?

The study analyzes the value that Gen Z gives to sustainability and starts to create a consumer profile.

The question is evident noting that the sustainability for sneakers purchase is less relevant than sustainability in general for Italian Gen Z consumers since the average of importance shifts from 3.29 to 2.55 when asked ‘How much do you value sustainability in your purchasing decision?’ and ‘how much do you value sustainability in you purchasing decision-related to sneakers?’. This adds consistency to the previous result which explained how the sustainability variable does not positively influence the shopping purchase decisions since only 4% of people placed it in the top 3, with an average of 6.35 which puts it below the median of 4.5.

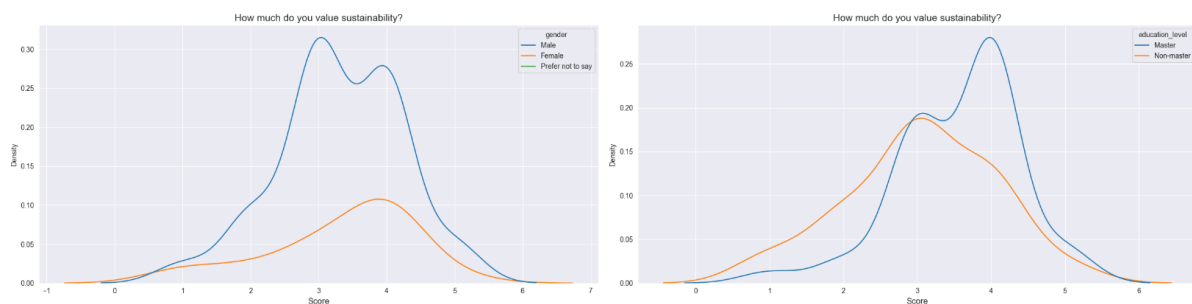


Figure 2- Sustainability value

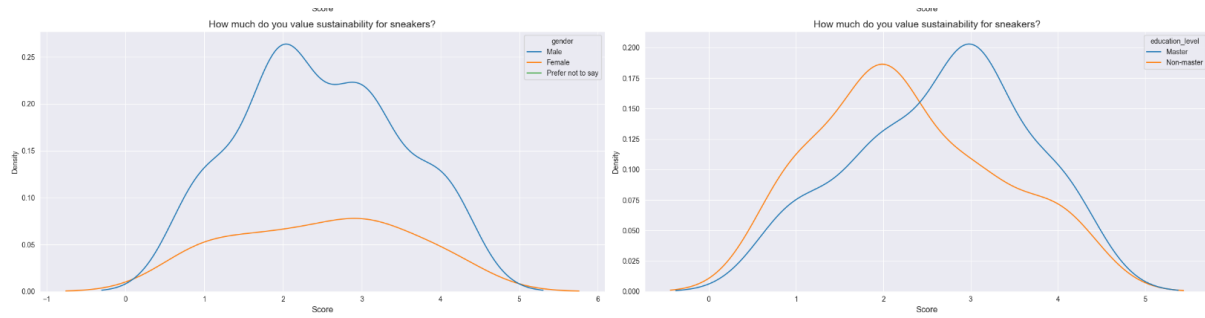


Figure 3 - sustainability value for sneakers

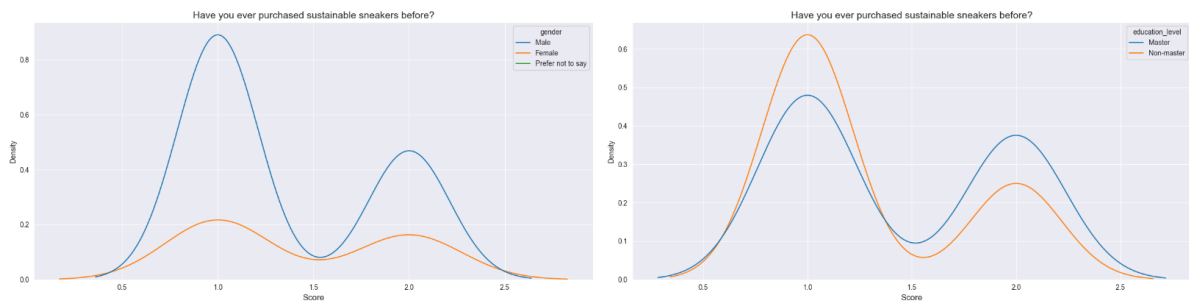


Figure 4 - Record of sustainable sneakers purchases

Above we can observe density plots from which we can extract some insights regarding the distribution of scores for the questions above (willingness to buy sustainable sneakers), with respect to gender and education.

- Gender
 - Women seem to slightly value more sustainable products, although it is not entirely clear from the density plots on the left side. There seems to be a difference in distribution (with peaks shifted to the right of the plots, indicating higher scores) for observations belonging to women's feedback.
- Education
 - By observing all the plots above (right column), we can notice that consumers with higher levels of education are more willing to buy sustainable products in general and they have also bought more sustainable sneakers in the past.

What is then the target consumer group for sustainable products?

From the insights above, we can state that Gen Z women (especially the ones that received a higher education) are more likely to buy sustainable sneakers. We can also conclude that

education seems to be a key factor in the decision process, as consumers that received higher education are more likely to buy sustainable sneakers. To validate the intuition from the graphics the study uses an ANOVA Method.

The first passage consists of checking if the normality assumptions hold for the distributions that we want to perform an ANOVA for. By a visual check from the density plots above, the distributions of our groups look multi-modal rather than Gaussian or log-normal, cases in which we could have performed an ANOVA (after a log transformation in the latter case).

To statistically validate the statement above (and check if the required assumptions on our distributions of interest hold) I used a QQ-plot to validate the assumption of normally distributed residuals. Let's begin with education, as the two samples have the same size and some of the distributions could slightly resemble a similar normal density. In this way, we know that if normality does not hold for this case, we can conclude the same for the rest, allowing us to move on and use a non-parametric test.

```
model = ols('Q9 ~ C(education)', df_gen_z).fit() # value of sustainability ~ gender
res = anova_lm(model, typ=1)
display(res_q9)
residuals = model.resid
plot = qqplot(residuals, line='s')
```

	df	sum_sq	mean_sq	F	PR(>F)
C(education)	3.0	14.556010	4.852003	5.717024	0.001232
Residual	93.0	78.928526	0.848694	NaN	NaN

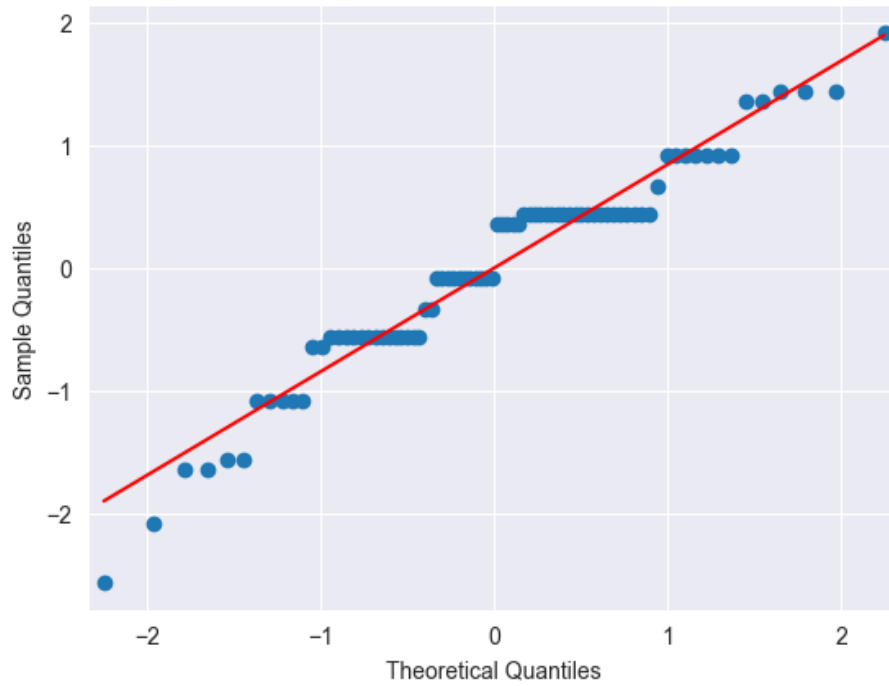


Figure 5 - QQ Plot Residuals Q9

Figure 6 - QQ Plot for residuals

In [174]:

```

model = ols('Q10 ~ C(education)', df_gen_z).fit() # value of sustainability ~ gender
res = anova_lm(model, typ=1)
display(res)
residuals = model.resid
plot = qqplot(residuals, line='s')

```

	df	sum_sq	mean_sq	F	PR(>F)
C(education)	3.0	4.534124	1.511375	1.564573	0.204907
Residual	76.0	73.415876	0.965998	NaN	NaN

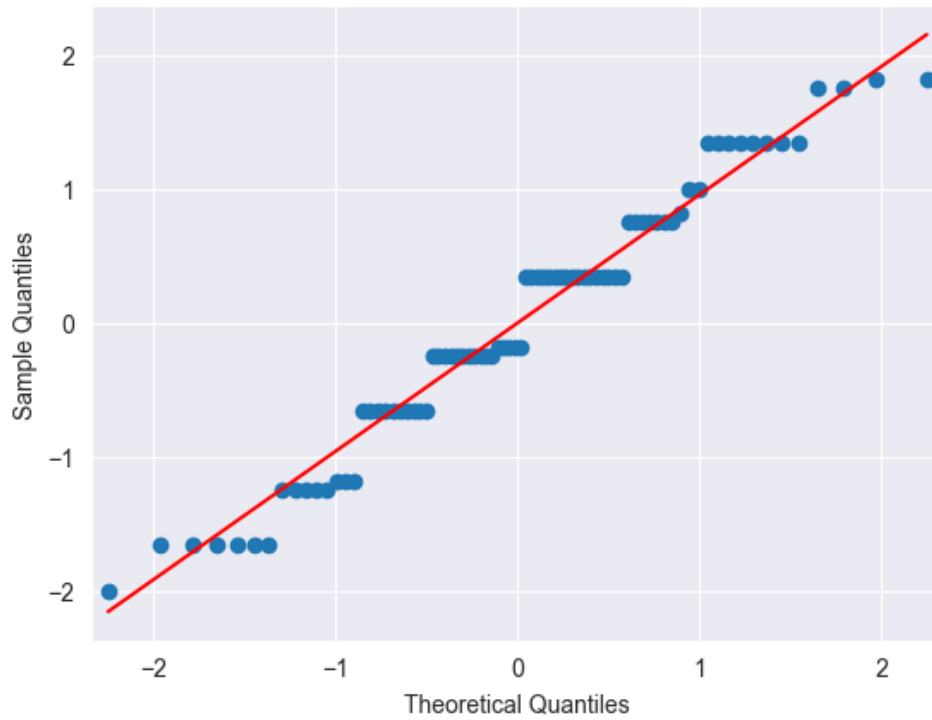


Figure 7 - QQ Plot Residuals Q10

In [175]:

```

model = ols('Q11 ~ C(education)', df_gen_z).fit() # value of sustainability ~ gender
res = anova_lm(model, typ=1)
display(res)
residuals = model.resid
plot = qqplot(residuals, line='s')

```

	df	sum_sq	mean_sq	F	PR(>F)
C(education)	3.0	2.949939	0.983313	4.80975	0.004037
Residual	76.0	15.537561	0.204442	NaN	NaN

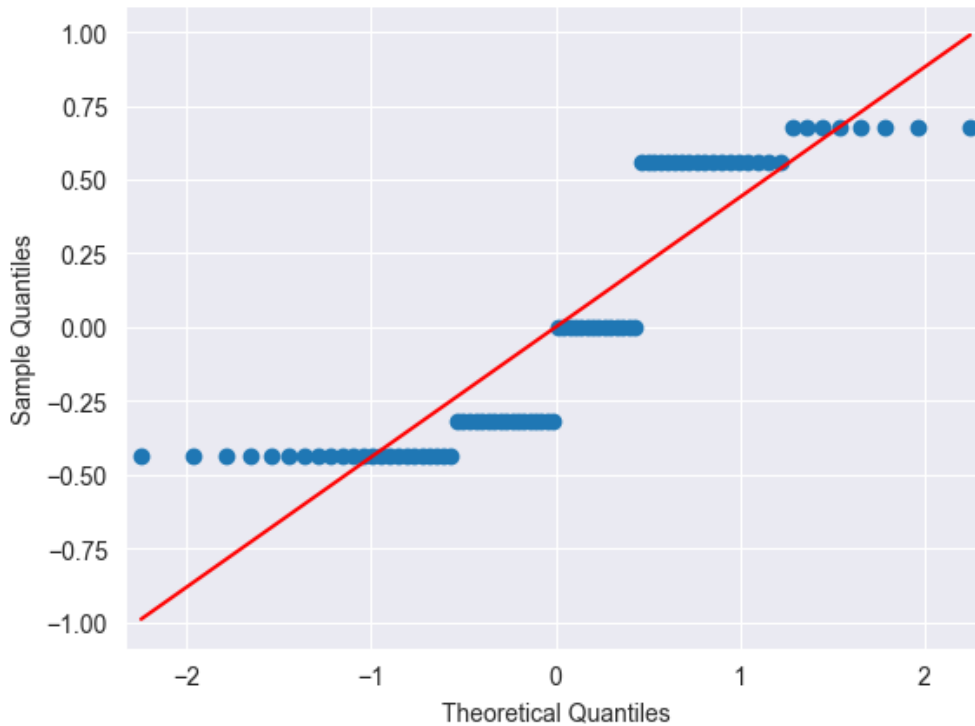


Figure 8- QQ Plot Residuals Q11

On the QQ-plot above, we would expect the residuals (blue dots) to follow the red line in case their normality assumption was true. In our scenario, we can safely conclude that it is not the case for Q1, therefore we can reject the null hypothesis of normality of the residuals. For questions Q9 and Q10, on the other hand, the residuals do seem to follow a normal distribution. We will go ahead by performing both parametric and non-parametric tests.

The analysis continues with a non-parametric test distribution free: The Kruskal-Wallis H-test.

This test allows us to assess if the null hypothesis that the population medians of all of the groups are equal (which is ideal for our case of skewed distributions). It is a non-parametric version of ANOVA. The test works on 2 or more independent samples, which may have different sizes.

For Education:

Reject H0

```
stats.kruskal(df_gen_z[df_gen_z['education'] == 'Master']['Q9'].values,
              df_gen_z[df_gen_z['education'] != 'Master']['Q9'].values)
KruskalResult(statistic=6.180086313900429, pvalue=0.012919597429844092)
```

```
stats.kruskal(df_gen_z[df_gen_z['education'] == 'Master']['Q10'].values,  
             df_gen_z[df_gen_z['education'] != 'Master']['Q10'].values)  
KruskalResult(statistic=3.197121010989807, pvalue=0.07376802218305047)
```

```
stats.kruskal(df_gen_z[df_gen_z['education'] == 'Master']['Q11'].values,  
             df_gen_z[df_gen_z['education'] != 'Master']['Q11'].values)  
KruskalResult(statistic=2.104543449865776, pvalue=0.14686217113745587)
```

Among all the null hypotheses that we tested, we can only reject the following (using a **significance level of 0.05**):

- H0: There is no significant difference in medians between different education levels when it comes to be value sustainability since the P Value is 0.0129

The other hypothesis had been confirmed since the P-value of Q10 and Q11 are respectively 0.0737 and 0.1468 so we can conclude that education level is indeed a key driver and the difference between the two observed groups in the sample is significant.

For Gender:

```
stats.kruskal(df_gen_z[df_gen_z['gender'] == 'Male']['Q9'].values,  
             df_gen_z[df_gen_z['gender'] == 'Female']['Q9'].values)  
KruskalResult(statistic=0.26410757146403224, pvalue=0.607312137933391)
```

In [181]:

```
stats.kruskal(df_gen_z[df_gen_z['gender'] == 'Male']['Q10'].values,  
             df_gen_z[df_gen_z['gender'] == 'Female']['Q10'].values)  
KruskalResult(statistic=0.006530467642892368, pvalue=0.93559201430114)
```

In [183]:

```
stats.kruskal(df_gen_z[df_gen_z['gender'] == 'Male']['Q11'].values,  
             df_gen_z[df_gen_z['gender'] == 'Female']['Q11'].values)  
KruskalResult(statistic=0.45949379989804523, pvalue=0.49786064150281717)
```

Considering the results, we can accept all the null hypotheses tested so we can conclude that gender is indeed a key driver and the difference between the two observed groups in the sample is significant.

Lastly, the hypothesis of the willingness to not pay a premium price for sustainable sneakers had been confirmed since only 18% of participants is truly willing to pay a premium price while the 21% are against and the 61% are doubtful.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Summary of key findings and their implications

As a result, most of the developed hypotheses have been validated through quantitative analysis.

- RQ1: *'What are the key factors for Italian Gen Z consumers driving their purchasing decisions about Sneakers?'*

This study clarified the most significant factors influencing the purchasing decisions of Gen-Zers in Italy, highlighting brand, price, and aesthetics as the foremost drivers.

Firstly, the brand emerged as a powerful driver of purchase among Gen-Zers. This group places great importance on the reputation and recognition of a brand, seeking products that align with their personal values and image. A well-established and respected brand can instill trust and confidence, making it more likely for Gen-Zers to opt for sneakers produced by those companies.

Secondly, the price has a fundamental role in shaping the purchasing behavior of Italian Gen-Zers. As a generation that is mindful of their financial resources, they tend to seek products that offer good value for their money. Gen-Zers are known for their price-consciousness and are keen on finding deals, discounts, and affordable options.

Additionally, aesthetics emerged as a crucial factor in driving purchases among Gen-Zers. This generation places high importance on the visual appeal of products. They are drawn to designs that are visually appealing, stylish, and aligned with the latest trends. Those products are more likely to capture the attention and interest of Gen-Zers in Italy.

- RQ2: *How is sustainability perceived within the sneakers industry by Italian Gen Z?*

The sustainability factor is gaining increasing importance among Italian Gen Z shoppers, reflecting their growing concern for environmental and social issues. This generation recognizes the importance of making conscious choices that align with their values and contribute to a more sustainable future. However, it is worth noting that when it specifically comes to sneakers, sustainability remains a factor of lesser significance, exerting only a slight

influence on their purchasing decisions. As explained above price, aesthetics, brand but also quality and comfort are still perceived as more important than sustainability for this industry.

- RQ3: *Is Italian Gen Z willing to pay a premium price for sustainable sneakers?*

The findings of the study revealed that the majority of participants did not strongly affirm their willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable sneakers. This suggests that, as confirmed above sustainability is not a key driver in their purchasing decisions.

Additionally, the study revealed that a more positive attitude toward sustainable sneakers was registered among women and highly educated individuals. These demographic factors appeared to influence the perception and value placed on sustainability when it comes to sneakers.

Women, as a significant segment within the Italian Gen Z population, demonstrated a greater inclination toward considering sustainability as a decisive factor in their sneaker purchases. This finding aligns with broader consumer trends, as women tend to exhibit higher levels of environmental consciousness and social responsibility in their shopping behaviors. Furthermore, the study highlighted that highly educated individuals exhibited a stronger inclination toward valuing sustainability in their sneaker choices. Education often plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' knowledge, awareness, and critical thinking, including their understanding of environmental issues. Highly educated Gen Zers may have a better understanding of the impact of their consumption choices on the environment and society, making them more likely to appreciate and prioritize sustainable alternatives.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for future research

Limitations must be addressed for this research. Some of the limitations found related to the responses obtained from the survey. First, this study lack of accuracy, as the survey collected only 104 valid responses that may not be sufficiently representative of the entire target group. In addition, 72 participants were males and only 32 were females, so there was not a fair representation of both sexes. Furthermore, most of the participants were university students, ranging in age from 18 to 26, while people belonging to the youngest cluster of Gen Z were not represented in the analysis. Moreover, because the sample obtained is relatively small when it was divided into additional subgroups, these subgroups were too small to be considered fully representative. In addition, responses collected through the in-depth interviews could be biased by the fact that respondents were chosen on the personal network of the author and many of them have working experience in the sneakers industry. For future research, a larger sample

should be considered, and the different subgroups should be represented equally to highlight the main differences between them. The sample for in-depth interviews should be more diverse and larger. In addition, younger members of Generation Z should be included to explore other possible differences between members of the same cohort. Suggestions for future research include investigating the same topics for different generations to determine how big is the change that Gen Z is driving and if this might bring a cultural shift of paradigm for future societies. Also, future research might dig deeper into other aspects of customer profiling as region belonging or social background to have a wider understanding of the group. Additionally, investigating on the population of other countries could provide valuable insights and inform the development of more culturally sensitive interventions.

5. 3 Managerial and Academic Implications

Although different studies have already been conducted on the perception and purchase intention of sneakers most of them have focused on different markets from the Italian one. Furthermore, this research examines a market that has not been investigated in depth, but also a peculiar target audience such as people born between 1997 and 2012. For this reason, this research has contributed to fill a gap regarding the topic of purchase intention toward sneakers by Generation Z in Italy

The findings of this research also present valuable managerial implications for sneakers companies. The Italian Generation Z find price, aesthetics, and brand fundamentals, so sustainable sneakers have to have these embedded in themselves these peculiarities, at the moment as emerged by the qualitative interviews there are concerns about the aesthetics of sustainable sneakers and their prices, which has emerged from the quantitative cannot rely on a demand for a premium price. Brands if they want to succeed on this new potential industry have to create goods that are perceived as cool and sell those at the same prices as classic sneakers avoiding moving the surplus of costs related to the innovation on the final consumers. Also, if the brand wants to gain a strong position in the emerging market it should focus on the segment of highly educated people and Women since these 2 subgroups are already more open to adapting sustainable footwear products.

In conclusion, the sneakers industry still relies on old value drivers such as price, since people have limited purchase power, brand since through the brand people show their values and adapt to social norms, and aesthetics since the sneakers are an important part of the outfit that talks

about the person that is wearing them. Taking into consideration these factors, the future might see the introduction of a new driver, the sustainability factor. This factor, which potentially might invest in other industries as well, might bring companies to redefine part of their business models if they want to stay relevant for Italian Gen Zers. Considering the potential disruptiveness of sustainable importance, established brands, to overcome the Innovator's Dilemma, must adapt to the new paradigm by fostering a culture of innovation, investing in research and development, and actively exploring emerging technologies and consumer trends. They should be willing to take calculated risks and potentially disrupt their own businesses to stay ahead of the curve and maintain their relevance in an evolving industry.

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