

Crafting Persuasive Ads: Key Design Elements Driving Sustainable Consumption Among China's Generation Z

Gu Yan¹, Rosalam Che Me^{1*}, Feroz De Costa²

¹Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor

²Faculty of Business, Higher Colleges of Technology, United Arab Emirates

*Corresponding author: rosalam@upm.edu.my

Abstract

Sustainable consumption is increasingly recognised as a crucial global development goal. However, the role of advertising in promoting sustainable consumption behaviours among China's Generation Z remains underexplored. This study investigated the influence of advertising design elements on sustainable consumption behaviours among this demographic. We surveyed 414 participants, focusing on sustainable consumption messages, visuals, and symbols. Using frequency analysis, multiple response analysis, and chi-square cross-tabulation, we identified key elements that resonate with Generation Z. Our findings indicate that advertisements featuring practical, authentic messages, and creative visual narratives, especially those incorporating culturally resonant symbols and utilising new media and social platforms, significantly enhance the effectiveness of sustainable consumption advertising. These insights offer valuable guidance for marketers and researchers in crafting impactful sustainable consumption advertisements.

Keywords: Generation Z; sustainable consumption; symbolic advertising; advertising design elements; China

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Introduction

As global environmental challenges intensify, promoting sustainable consumption has become a critical objective, with advertising playing a pivotal role in shaping cultural norms and consumer behaviour (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 2; UNEP et al., 2017). At the same time, advertising can also perpetuate consumer culture, particularly among young people (National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, 2010). In China, Generation Z (born roughly 1995–2010) constitutes nearly one-fifth of the population and frequently engages in unsustainable consumption behaviours, leading to significant resource waste and environmental pressures (Ren, 2022, p. 2; Zhao, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates which advertising design elements most effectively influence sustainable consumption among Chinese Generation Z. We focus on the message, visual, and symbolic components of Sustainable Consumption Advertisements (SCA) and examine how they resonate with this cohort. By identifying the elements most relevant to Gen Z and clarifying how they support persuasion, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding design-level guidance for sustainability communication in the Chinese context (Li & Hu, 2022).

To examine these questions empirically, we surveyed 414 Chinese Generation Z consumers. Data analysis included frequency analysis, multiple response analysis,

and chi-square cross-tabulation. The findings elucidated the impactful design and composition of SCA and highlighted the importance of symbolic meaning in enhancing the effectiveness of SCA communication (Berger et al., 2011).

This study's significance lies in its investigation of advertising elements that can successfully influence future mainstream consumers in China, offering a framework for crafting SCA that encourage Generation Z to adopt sustainable consumption habits, thereby mitigating negative social and environmental impacts.

Within China's unique cultural context, symbolic consumption is a key driver in shaping Generation Z's sustainable consumption patterns (Park et al., 2022). Effective advertising in this context goes beyond Western paradigms, advocates for humanistic and cultural values, and promotes a culture of sustainable consumption through carefully crafted Public Service Announcements (PSAs) (Ibroscheva, 2013).

We therefore propose that SCA incorporating rich informational, visual, and symbolic elements may significantly shape the values and behaviours of Generation Z, guiding them towards more sustainable consumption decisions.

Literature review

Generation Z Characteristics and Sustainable Consumption Preferences

China's Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2009, represents a transformative demographic force of approximately 260 million people, nearly one-fifth of the country's population (Yang & Chen, 2022). China's rapid economic expansion has shaped this generation, influencing their consumption behaviours and worldviews. They exhibit a dual tendency towards consumerism and sustainability awareness, reflecting the economic and cultural shifts during their formative years (Ren, 2022; Yao, 2022).

The "sustainability paradox" describes their increased purchasing power coexisting with environmental awareness (Zhao, 2022). This paradox is crucial for understanding their consumption patterns, which are characterised by overconsumption and impulse buying, exacerbated by easy access to credit and "buy now, pay later" options (Ren, 2022). These behaviours pose risks to financial and environmental sustainability.

As digital natives, Gen Z is deeply engaged with technology, shaping their shopping habits and susceptibility to the "idol economy" (Xie & Wang, 2022). Their preference for online shopping and platforms like WeChat underscores digital media's role as a key channel for brand interaction (Yang & Chen, 2022; Zhang, 2021). If one maintains authenticity, social media and influencer marketing can effectively communicate sustainable messages (Janusz, 2020).

Despite their digital immersion, Generation Z has a complex relationship with sustainability. While they express interest in social issues, their consumption often conflicts with sustainable practices (Zhao, 2022). Higher education levels among Gen Z suggest they may be more receptive to complex sustainable messages (Li, 2022). Hence, integrating sustainability with national pride and cultural values can enhance message resonance (Xie & Wang, 2022).

Social influences, particularly "circular consumption," significantly shape Generation Z's consumption patterns (L. Zhang & Yang, 2021). Emphasising experiences and social benefits can encourage a shift from material to experiential consumption (He, 2022). This strategy leverages peer interactions to promote sustainable practices through word of mouth and shareable content.

The socioeconomic environment has fostered a strong sense of individualism in Generation Z, which is reflected in their desire for personalised products and experiences (He, 2022). Sustainable brands can cater to this preference by offering customisation options that maintain environmental integrity (Zeng, 2021). This approach meets their need for uniqueness while promoting personal and environmental benefits.

Despite their awareness, Generation Z often lacks a comprehensive understanding of the broader impacts of sustainable consumption (Selma et al., 2019). Transparent, fact-based advertising strategies are essential to empower informed decision-making (Zhu, 2020). Such strategies can bridge knowledge gaps and encourage more sustainable consumer behaviours.

Cultural factors and generational differences significantly influence sustainable consumption patterns (Guo & Xiang, 2015). Media plays a crucial role in shaping consumer values, necessitating a nuanced advertising approach that considers Generation Z's diversity (Wang & Zhou, 2022).

The interplay of consumerism and sustainability among China's Generation Z presents both challenges and opportunities for sustainable advertising. By incorporating insights into digital influence, cultural identity, and social dynamics, advertisers can develop strategies that resonate with Generation Z's values and preferences. This approach addresses environmental impacts and aligns with their evolving identities, paving the way for a more sustainable future.

Symbolic Consumption and Sustainable Consumption Communication

Baudrillard posited that the essence of consumer culture lies in symbolic consumption, which transcends mere possession of goods. Symbolic consumption, value identification, and emotional connection influence the consumption behaviours of China's Generation Z (Sheng & Yue, 2022). This generation's adoption of sustainable products hinges on their symbolic values and emotional needs, positioning sustainable consumption as a means of self-expression and identity formation (Lu, 2022).

Advertisements play a crucial role in this context, serving as a conduit between consumers and advertisers. Park and An (2004) emphasised that advertisements convey intended meanings, linking sustainable products to consumers' identities. This aligns with Zhao's (2013) assertion that the core of consumerist culture in Chinese commercial advertising lies in developing symbolic representations of consumerism.

Symbolic consumption, as defined by Junkyo and Kim (2005), involves consumption based on emotional, subjective, and symbolic values rather than utility. This is particularly relevant for China's Generation Z, who prioritise symbolic meaning over functional attributes (Lu, 2022; Sheng & Yue, 2022). The desire for social recognition and belonging drives their consumption behaviour (Witt, 2010).

The rise of digital media has transformed the symbolic consumption landscape. Qiu (2014) emphasised the influence of mass media, advertising, and self-media on promoting the symbolic cultural value of commodities through encoding and decoding. Social media amplifies the symbolic value of products through peer recognition, making "social currency" crucial (Zhu & Yan, 2022).

China's Generation Z shares a cultural background that aids in interpreting sustainable consumption symbols. Zhuang and Wang (2022) noted that communities adopt similar encoding and decoding methods to cultivate consistent meanings in shared content. This framework fosters the creation and dissemination of group-specific symbols related to sustainable consumption.

Symbolic consumption serves as the emotional bond and “social currency” for Generation Z, strengthening connections within consumer groups (Zhu & Yan, 2022). This community-oriented style prioritises peer recognition and social belonging, intertwining consumption with social interaction and self-cognition. This virtual consumption exemplifies cultural symbolic consumption, helping adolescents construct subjective identity and address identity crises (Lu, 2022).

Symbolic consumption indicates social status, group membership, or self-esteem, driven by symbolic value (Witt, 2010). At the semiotic level, meaning is constructed by creating and attributing meaning, applying existing meaning to products through icons, indicators, or symbols (Kettemann, 2013). Advertising reflects dominant ideological themes through symbolic manipulation.

Tangsupwattana and Liu (2018) emphasised that lifestyle and self-concept form the basis of symbolic consumption, with positive emotional experiences enhancing behaviour. Integrating sustainable practices into lifestyle aspirations and self-concepts, while linking them to broader narratives of progress and happiness, resonates with values (Pigulevskiy & Mirskaya, 2020).

Generation Z's active participation in consumer discourse shows they are advocates and contributors to responsible practices (Liu & Liu, 2020). This opens avenues for promoting sustainable development through the “ideal self” in consumer culture. Symbolic consumption patterns serve as emotional bonds and “social currency,” indicating that peers' recognition of sustainable behaviours increases the likelihood of adoption (Sheng & Yue, 2022).

The sustainable symbolic consumption among China's Generation Z is characterised by digital influence, identity construction, community orientation, and shared cultural interpretation. Understanding these factors is crucial for marketers, policymakers, and researchers to effectively promote sustainable consumption habits. By combining sustainable consumption with the symbolic values, emotional needs, and digital lifestyle of China's Generation Z, it is possible to cultivate a sustainable consumption culture that resonates with their unique characteristics and aspirations.

Advertising and Sustainable Consumption of Chinese Generation Z

The role of advertising in shaping consumer behaviour is a topic of considerable debate. Critics argue that advertising fosters imitation, constructs symbolic meanings, and encourages unrealistic desires, ultimately contributing to global overconsumption and negatively impacting consumer well-being (Jones, 2020; Stafford & Pounders, 2021; UNEP et al., 2017; Zhou, 2018). Conversely, Jones (2020) viewed advertising as a medium that disseminates valuable information, shapes cultural norms, and inspires progressive behaviours (Jones, 2020). This duality underscores the complex influence of advertising on societal consumption patterns, particularly regarding sustainable consumption (Gilbert et al., 2021).

Advertising's sociocultural value is pivotal; it acts as a cultural mediator that influences audience behaviour and understanding. It contributes to the construction of shared images and potentially shapes social and collective patterns (Soar, 2002; Traini, 2018). To promote sustainable consumption, various initiatives have been proposed, utilising advertising's influence to equip target audiences with the necessary information, attitudes, capabilities, and infrastructure for sustainable practices (Chen, 2000; Ziesemer et al., 2021).

For China's Generation Z, public self-awareness and identity salience are crucial when crafting advertising messages. This generation's subculture underscores the importance of social identity and value expression in consumption patterns (Zhang

& Yang, 2021; Zhang, 2010). Advertising can actively promote a shared value system, especially in fostering sustainable consumption practices. The integration of semiotics and advertising has emerged as a potent method for raising public awareness about sustainable behaviour. Semiotics provides a framework for crafting advertising messages that resonate deeply with consumers, particularly in the Chinese context where the development of symbolic meanings is essential (Kurniawan, 2019; Zhao, 2013). Symbolic advertising effectively uses logos, symbols, images, and visual aids to promote products, shape brand images, and demonstrate the relationship between brands and consumer beliefs and values (Oputa & Ahmad, 2018).

In SCA for Generation Z, key strategies include: crafting persuasive texts that align with the symbolic value system and ideology of Generation Z's cognitive habits (Lee, 2012); using visual communication strategies that accurately portray product attributes through easily recognizable "sustainable consumption symbols" (C & Johana, 2014); producing semantic structures, symbolic compositions, and rhetorical expressions that integrate sustainable culture with Generation Z's subculture (Lim, 2019); and utilizing iconic, indexical, or symbolic symbols in public service advertisements to introduce new meanings and establish connections between products and ideal values (Kettemann, 2013).

The digital age necessitates strategies such as precise targeting, personalised information, and user-centred interactions (Kwak, 2014; Zhao, 2017). The influence of digital influencers in building trust among Generation Z and guiding their choices is significant, potentially replacing traditional advertising methods (Janusz, 2020).

Advertising, as a powerful cultural mediator, offers the possibility of aligning sustainable practices with cultural aspirations and social progress while shaping social values and consumption behaviours. The review emphasises the significant influence of symbolic values and identity expressions on Generation Z's consumption patterns. Semiotics therefore plays a crucial role in crafting advertising messages that resonate deeply with this population and have a meaningful impact.

Summary and Research Gaps

In conclusion, the integration of semiotics into SCA, particularly in Public Service Advertising (PSA), offers a promising avenue for promoting sustainable consumption among China's Generation Z. Recent studies further underscore the value of culturally grounded symbols (Lan & Zhou, 2025; Ma, 2024), eco-symbolism in packaging and branding (Xu, 2024; Jiang, 2024), and digital interactivity through short-video or gamified PSAs (Cao, 2024; Shen & Hu, 2024). However, several gaps remain. First, most research treats advertising effects in broad terms, without systematically disentangling the message, visual, and symbolic design elements that drive persuasion. Second, analyses are often descriptive, rarely incorporating effect-estimating models, effect sizes, or confidence intervals. Third, while symbolic resonance and influencer strategies are noted, they are seldom tested in combination within China's unique cultural and economic context, where Gen Z faces both symbolic engagement and pragmatic constraints (Zhang, 2025). Addressing these gaps, the present study provides a design-level framework and empirical evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of SCA among Chinese Gen Z.

Methodology

Data Collection Procedure

This study employed an online survey distributed through Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn/>), China's largest online survey platform, which has facilitated nearly 138 million surveys and data collections since 2006 (Ren, 2022). The survey was disseminated via various social media channels and online forums commonly

used by Generation Z users. Data collection took place over a four-week period in April 2024. Prior to participation, all respondents provided informed consent and were assured of response confidentiality and anonymity. The study also received approval from JKEUPM (Jawatankuasa Etika Universiti Untuk Penyelidikan Melibatkan Manusia) before data collection commenced.

Questionnaire Structure and Design

The study utilised a quantitative research design and a structured questionnaire. The target population comprised Chinese Generation Z consumers born between 1995 and 2010. Based on a comprehensive literature review, the questionnaire included single-choice and multiple-choice questions divided into three main sections. Section A collected demographic information, including age, gender, education level, and occupation. Section B aimed to understand respondents' exposure to Sustainable Consumption Advertisements (SCA) and gather insights into the advertising strategies they find influential. Section C focused on the key advertising design elements, including messages, visuals, and particularly symbols, that influence respondents' sustainable consumption. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the questionnaire structure, while Chart 1 outlines the theoretical foundations and sources for each section of the questionnaire.

Table 1: Questionnaire Structure and Content Overview

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SECTION A	Demography Information A2. Gender A3. Education A4. Occupation A5. Income	A1. Age	Single Choice
		Single Choice	
		Single Choice	
		Single Choice	
		Single Choice	
SECTION B	Influential SCA Strategies B2. Advertising Style B3. Creative Strategy B4. Advertising Types B5. Display Strategy	B1. Frequency of Exposure	Single Choice
		Multiple Choice	
		Multiple Choice	
		Multiple Choice	
		Multiple Choice	
SECTION C	Influential SCA Design Elements C2. Visual Design Elements C3. Influential Symbols C4. Influential Symbolic Meanings C5. Effectiveness of Symbolic	C1. Information Elements	Multiple Choice
		Multiple Choice	
		Multiple Choice	
		Multiple Choice	
		Single Choice	

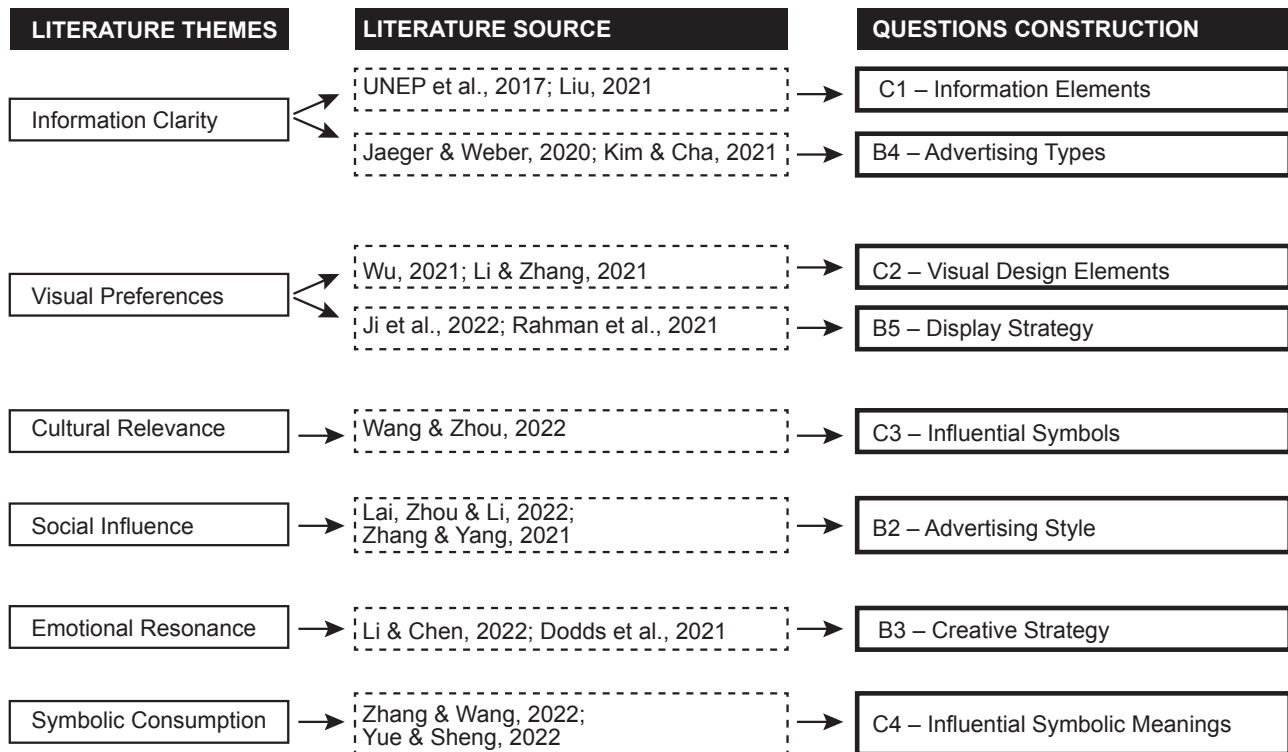


Figure 1: Theoretical Foundations and Sources for Questionnaire Design

Measurements

To ensure the questionnaire's clarity and validity, a pilot study involving 30 participants was conducted. Based on the feedback received, final adjustments were made to address ambiguities, improve wording, and enhance flow, thereby reducing potential response bias. Content validity was further ensured through expert review by three specialists in sustainable consumption, advertising, and Generation Z consumer behaviour.

Sampling and Sample Size

The study targeted Chinese Generation Z consumers (born between 1995-2010) using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods. The initial focus was on students from five universities in Shandong Province, with the sample subsequently expanded through participants' social networks. Convenience sampling was chosen for its cost-efficiency and ease of access to a large number of respondents within a short timeframe. Snowball sampling was employed to reach a broader and more diverse subset of the population, leveraging participants' social networks to identify additional respondents likely engaged in sustainability issues.

The target sample size was determined to be 377 respondents, calculated using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, representing a population size exceeding 20,000. After initial collection of 432 questionnaires, data cleaning was conducted to ensure validity. Responses were removed if they met any of the following operational criteria for invalid samples:

1. completion time of less than 30 seconds, suggesting inattentive responding;
2. straight-lining or uniform answers across multi-item blocks (e.g., selecting the same option for more than 80% of items);
3. repeated patterned responses (e.g., alternating A–B–A–B sequences) indicating non-engagement;

4. meaningless or irrelevant text in open-ended items.

After applying these criteria, 18 cases were excluded, leaving a final valid sample of 414 respondents for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. The analysis procedures included frequency analysis, multiple response analysis, and chi-square cross-tabulation analysis. Frequency analysis was applied to single-choice questions in the questionnaire, which included demographic information from Section A (questions A1-A5). Additionally, the impact of symbols on willingness to consume sustainably was analysed by comparing the frequency of exposure to SCA (question B1) with the perceived impact of symbols (question C5).

Multiple response analysis was conducted for multiple-choice questions in Sections B (B2-B5) and C (C1-C4) to identify the most important options within each element. Table 3 provides a detailed overview of the frequency and multiple response analyses conducted. Furthermore, chi-square cross-tabulation analysis was performed to explore relationships between demographic variables (A1-A4) and advertising elements (B2-B5, C1-C4). Table 4 outlines the chi-square cross-tabulation analysis framework.

Table 2: Frequency Analyses Framework

Frequency Analysis		
Single-Choice Question	A1	Age
	A2	Gender
	A3	Education
	A4	Occupation
	A5	Income
	B1	Frequency of Exposure
	C5	Willingness of SC

Table 3: Multiple Response Analyses Framework

Multiple Response Analysis		
Multiple-Choice Question	B2	Advertising Style
	B3	Creative Strategy
	B4	Advertising Types
	B5	Display Strategy
	C1	Information Elements
	C2	Visual Design Elements
	C3	Influential Symbols
	C4	Influential Symbolic Meanings

Table 4: Chi-square Cross-Tabulation Analysis Matrix for Demographic Variables and Advertising Elements

Chi-Square Cross-Tabulation Analysis				
Segmented Population		Influential Elements		
Age	1995-2000 (23-28)	VS	B2. Advertising Style	
	2001-2005 (18-22)		B3. Creative Strategy	
Gender	Male		B4. Advertising Types	
	Female		B5. Display Strategy	
Occupation	Students		C1. Information Elements	
	Non-students		C2. Visual Design Elements	
Income	3500 RMB and Above		C3. Influential Symbols	
	Below 3500 RMB		C4. Influential Symbolic Meanings	

This comprehensive analytical approach ensured a thorough examination of the data, providing insights into the relationships between demographic factors and advertising elements influencing sustainable consumption among China's Generation Z.

Results

The data collected from 414 Chinese Generation Z consumers were analysed using SPSS, employing various statistical techniques to derive meaningful insights from the survey responses. This section presents a comprehensive examination of the findings, integrating descriptive analyses with interpretative discussion to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between advertising and sustainable consumption among this demographic.

Descriptive Analysis Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile and Its Implications

The study sample represents a diverse group of Chinese Generation Z consumers, with significant implications for understanding sustainable consumption patterns. As shown in Table 5, the majority (98.79%) of the respondents fall within the 18-28 age range, split almost evenly between 18-22 (47.1%) and 23-28 (51.69%). This balanced distribution allows for a nuanced analysis of how sustainable consumption attitudes and behaviours may evolve across different life stages in Generation Z.

A notable gender skew was observed, with 65.22% of respondents being female, 33.5% being male, and a small percentage (0.72%) identifying as non-binary. This gender imbalance, while potentially limiting the generalisability of findings across genders, aligns with previous research suggesting that women tend to be more engaged with sustainability issues. Future studies might explore whether this gender disparity reflects a broader trend in sustainable consumption interest among Chinese Generation Z or is an artifact of the sampling method.

The sample's high education level, with 92.27% having college or equivalent education and 5.8% holding master's degrees or above, indicates a well-informed cohort. This educational profile suggests that the findings may be particularly relevant to understanding sustainable consumption behaviours among urban, educated Chinese youth. However, it also highlights the need for future research to explore sustainable consumption patterns among less educated segments of Generation Z.

The occupational distribution, dominated by students (52.66%), followed by professional and technical personnel (19.32%) and freelancers (16.43%), reflects the transitional life stage of Generation Z. This diversity in occupational status provides an opportunity to examine how different life circumstances might influence sustainable consumption attitudes and behaviours. For instance, the high proportion of students might indicate a greater openness to new ideas and lifestyle changes, potentially making them more receptive to sustainable consumption messaging.

The income distribution, with half of the respondents earning 3500¥ or below, aligns with the predominance of students in the sample. This economic profile is crucial for understanding the financial constraints that may impact sustainable consumption choices among Generation Z. It raises important questions about the affordability of sustainable products and the need for advertising strategies that address both environmental concerns and economic realities.

Table 5: Frequency Analysis of the Sample Population

Demographics Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
A1-Age	1995-2000 (23-28 years old)	214	51.69
	2001-2005 (18-22 years old)	195	47.1
	2006-2010 (13-17 years old)	3	0.72
	Others (please specify)	2	0.48
A2-Gender	Male	139	33.5
	Female	270	65.22
	Non-binary	3	0.72
	Others (please specify)	2	0.48
A3-Education	A. High school and below	5	1.21
	B. College and equivalent	382	92.27
	C. Master's degree and above	24	5.8%
	D. Others	3	0.72
A4-Occupation	A. Students	218	52.66
	B. Professional and technical personnel	80	19.32
	C. Freelancers	68	16.43
	D. Others	48	11.59
A5-Income	A. 3500¥ and below	207	50
	B. 3500¥ - 5000¥	87	21.01
	C. 5000¥ - 10000¥	94	22.71
	D. 10,000¥ and above	26	6.28

Exposure to SCA: Challenges and Opportunities

The varied landscape of exposure to SCA among Chinese Generation Z consumers revealed both challenges and opportunities for marketers and policymakers. Table 6 shows the distribution of responses to advertising message types, revealing both challenges and opportunities for marketers and policymakers. The finding that 43% of the respondents encountered SCA less than once per week indicates a significant gap in reach and frequency of sustainability messaging. This low exposure rate suggests that current advertising strategies may be insufficient in creating sustained awareness and engagement with sustainable consumption issues (Ye & Zhang, 2018).

Conversely, the moderate exposure reported by 26.57% of the participants (3-5 times per week) and the small but consistently engaged segment (6.76%) reporting daily exposure demonstrate that there is a receptive audience for SCA. These findings align with previous research indicating a growing interest in sustainability among Chinese youth (Wang, 2021). The challenge for advertisers lies in expanding this engaged audience and increasing the frequency of exposure for those currently underexposed to SCA.

It is particularly noteworthy that a substantial proportion (20.53%) of the respondents were unsure about their exposure to SCA. This uncertainty could indicate a lack of memorability or distinctiveness in current SCA strategies. It suggests a need for more impactful and engaging advertising approaches that resonate with Generation Z's values and communication preferences. Future research could explore the specific characteristics of memorable versus forgettable SCAs to inform more effective advertising strategies.

The low percentage (3.14%) reporting never seeing SCA is encouraging suggests that sustainability messaging has achieved broad, if not always frequent, reach among Chinese Generation Z consumers. This baseline awareness provides a foundation upon which more targeted and frequent advertising campaigns can build

Table 6: Frequency of Exposure to SCA

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
B1-Frequency of Exposure to SCA	Unsure	85	20.53
	Never seen	13	3.14
	Seen, but very rarely (<1 time/week)	178	43
	Frequently seen (3-5 times/week)	110	26.57
	Daily (>5 times/week)	28	6.76

The Power of Symbolic Advertising in Driving Sustainable Consumption

Table 7 illustrates the strong influence of symbolic advertising on Generation Z's willingness to engage in sustainable consumption. Majority (64.78%) of the respondents reported increased concern about sustainable consumption after interpreting symbolic advertisements, underscoring the potential of this approach to bridge the awareness-action gap in sustainable behaviour. This finding supports the potential of symbolic advertising to bridge the gap between awareness and action, addressing the key challenge of promoting sustainable consumption among Generation Z (Sheng & Yue, 2022).

The deep inspiration reported by 24.64% of the respondents and the sense of empowerment experienced by 14.49% in response to symbolic sustainability advertising are particularly significant. These emotional and motivational responses suggest that symbolic advertising can tap deeper psychological drivers of behaviour change. This aligns with theories of symbolic consumption, which posit that consumers use products and behaviours as a means of self-expression and identity formation (Yang, 2020).

The effectiveness of ads incorporating cultural symbols and lifestyle elements supports the strategy of blending Chinese cultural values with global sustainability concepts. The concept of "glocalization" in advertising (Guo & Xiang, 2015), which adapts global ideas to local cultural contexts, resonates with this approach. This blended approach seems particularly effective for Chinese Generation Z, who often balance traditional values with global influences. This finding suggests a synergistic effect when blending Chinese cultural values with global sustainability concepts, echoing Li and Yang's (2021) observations on value-driven consumption patterns among Chinese Gen Z. Furthermore, it supports Wang's (2020) proposition that sustainable consumption can serve as a vehicle for social identity formation and self-expression among this demographic (Casadomet, 2021).

These findings have significant implications for marketers and policymakers. They suggest that well-crafted symbolic advertising can serve as a powerful tool for promoting sustainable consumption behaviours among Chinese Generation Z consumers. By creating messages that resonate with cultural values and lifestyle aspirations, there is significant potential to transform awareness into action and foster a more sustainable consumer culture.

However, it is important to note that while symbolic advertising shows promise, it should be part of a broader, multi-faceted approach to promoting sustainable consumption. Future research could explore how symbolic advertising interacts with other factors, such as product availability, pricing, and peer influence, in shaping sustainable consumption behaviours among Chinese Generation Z.

Table 7: Impact of Symbolic Advertising for Sustainable Consumption

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
C5. The Effectiveness of Symbolic Advertising	Deeply Inspired	102	24.64
	Empowered/Self-Empowered	60	14.49
	Keen Interest	94	22.71
	Start Paying Attention	144	34.78
	Completely Indifferent	12	2.9
	Others	2	0.48

Multiple Response Analysis Results and Discussion

Table 8 illustrates the perceived credibility of spokesperson types. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and peer influencers were rated more credible than celebrities, reflecting Gen Z's preference for relatability and authenticity over traditional fame. Among the various advertising styles, Artistic Expression Design Style emerged as the most influential, with a penetration rate of 75.85% among the respondents. Meanwhile, Differentiated Design Style closely followed at 64.01%. Interesting Design Style and Function-Oriented Design Style also showed significant impact, with penetration rates of 56.04% and 55.31%, respectively. The Minimalist Design Style, while less popular, still resonated with 45.41% of respondents. These findings suggest that Generation Z consumers in China are particularly drawn to visually appealing and unique advertising styles that allow for creative expression (Park et al., 2022).

In terms of creative strategies, Storytelling proved to be the most effective, with a remarkable 76.33% penetration rate. This was closely followed by Humour (64.49%) and Emotional Appeal (64.01%), indicating that Generation Z consumers respond strongly to narratives and content that evoke feelings or amusement. Interestingly, the use of Celebrities or Influencers/Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) had a lower impact, with only 36.71% penetration, suggesting that authentic storytelling and emotional connections may be more valuable than endorsements for this demographic (Su & Song, 2020).

When examining influential advertising types, New Media Advertising emerged as the most influential type, with a 75.85% penetration rate, reflecting the digital-native nature of Generation Z. Digital Advertising followed at 64.01%, further emphasising the importance of online platforms. Traditional forms like Outdoor Advertising (56.04%) and Print Advertising (55.31%) continued to maintain their relevance, while Broadcast Advertising showed a lower but significant impact at 45.41%. This distribution highlights the importance of a multi-channel approach, with a strong emphasis on digital platforms (Janusz, 2020).

Regarding influential advertising display strategies, social media stood out as the most effective, with an impressive 81.88% penetration rate. This was followed by Online Platforms (60.63%) and Official Platforms (60.39%), underscoring the digital-first preference of Generation Z. Traditional Media and Outdoor Media still showed substantial influence, with penetration rates of 51.69% and 53.14%, respectively. These findings reinforce the importance of a strong social media presence and digital strategy while not completely neglecting traditional channels (Yang & Chen, 2022).

Table 8: Multiple Response Analysis of SCA Strategies

	Categories	Response (n)	Response Rate (%)	Penetration Rate (n=414) (%)	Cramer's V
B2. Influential Advertising Style	Function-oriented Design Style	229	17.47	55.31	0.39
	Minimalist Design Style	188	14.34	45.41	
	Interesting Design Style	232	17.7	56.04	
	Differentiated Design Style	265	20.21	64.01	
	Artistic Expression Design Style	314	23.95	75.85	
	Other	83	6.33	20.05	
B3. Influential Advertising Creative Strategy	Humour	267	22.36	64.49	0.391
	Emotional Appeal (happiness/nostalgia/guilt, etc.)	265	22.19	64.01	
	Storytelling	316	26.47	76.33	
	Celebrities or Influencers/KOLs (key opinion leaders)	152	12.73	36.71	
	Interaction (experience)	190	15.91	45.89	
	Other	4	0.34	0.97	
B4. Influential Advertising Types	Print Advertising	229	17.47	55.31	0.261
	Broadcast Advertising	188	14.34	45.41	
	Outdoor Advertising	232	17.7	56.04	
	Digital Advertising	265	20.21	64.01	
	New Media Advertising	314	23.95	75.85	
	Direct Mail Advertising	83	6.33	20.05	
B5. Influential Advertising Display Strategy	Official Platforms	250	19.58	60.39	0.378
	Social Media	339	26.55	81.88	
	Online Platforms	251	19.66	60.63	
	Traditional Media	214	16.76	51.69	
	Outdoor Media	220	17.23	53.14	
	Others	3	0.23	0.72	

Table 9 presents the results of the multiple response analysis for SCA design elements. The data revealed a compelling preference for practical and authentic sustainable consumption content among Generation Z consumers. The high penetration rates of concrete advice (68.84%), authentic experiences (68.12%), and essential knowledge (67.63%) suggest a sophisticated audience that values substance over superficiality (Hua et al., 2020). Effect sizes were generally in the small-to-moderate range, highlighting that no single design element solely determined responses but several exerted meaningful influence.

This trend challenges the notion that younger consumers are primarily driven by fleeting trends or superficial messaging (Liu, 2022). Instead, it points to a discerning demographic that seeks meaningful engagement with sustainability issues, potentially driven by a heightened awareness of environmental challenges and a desire for personal agency in addressing them.

Visual elements emerge as powerful conduits for sustainable consumption messaging, with icons, labels, and symbols leading at a 74.15% penetration rate. This prominence of visual cues indicates a shift towards more immediate, accessible forms of communication in an era of information overload. The effectiveness of infographics (63.04%) and illustrations (62.8%) further underscores the importance of visual storytelling in conveying complex sustainability concepts (C & Johana, 2014). This trend raises intriguing questions about the evolving nature of literacy in the digital age and the potential for visual languages to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers in global sustainability efforts (Lazard et al., 2020).

The resonance of environmental symbols (68.36%) alongside emotionally linked (57.73%) and cultural symbols (53.38%) revealed a nuanced understanding of

sustainability among Generation Z. This confluence suggests that effective SCA must navigate the intersection of global environmental concerns and local cultural contexts. It challenges advertisers to craft messages that are simultaneously universal in their environmental appeal and deeply rooted in specific cultural narratives, a balancing act that requires profound cultural intelligence and environmental awareness (Ibroscheva, 2013).

Perhaps most revealing is the overwhelming influence of lifestyle and personal identity factors in SCA effectiveness. The high penetration rate of lifestyle-related messaging (76.33%) indicates that Generation Z views sustainable consumption not as an isolated activity but as an integral part of their identity and daily rituals. This integration of sustainability into personal narratives presents both opportunities and challenges for marketers and policymakers (Robichaud & Yu, 2021; UNEP et al., 2017) It suggests the potential for profound, lasting changes in consumer behaviour, but it also raises ethical questions about the commodification of environmental values and the potential for greenwashing (Zhu, 2020).

The complex interplay of these factors paints a picture of a Generation Z that is far from monolithic in its approach to sustainability. Instead, we see a demographic navigating the tensions between global environmental consciousness and personal identity formation, between digital fluency and a desire for authentic experiences, and between pragmatic action and emotional resonance.

Table 9: Multiple Response Analysis of SCA Design Elements

	Categories	Response (n)	Response Rate (%)	Penetration Rate (n=414) (%)
C1. Influential Information Elements	Basic and essential SC knowledge/information	280	22.26	67.63
	Concrete and practical SC advice/guidance	285	22.66	68.84
	Authentic SC Experiences/Stories/Testimonials	282	22.42	68.12
	Reliable SC statistical data and facts	226	17.97	54.59
	Officially certified SC labels or symbols	185	14.71	44.69
C2. Influential Advertising Visual Design Elements	SC Icons, labels or symbols	307	23.95	74.15
	SC infographics	261	20.36	63.04
	SC Photos or illustrations	260	20.28	62.8
	SC Videos or animations	255	19.89	61.59
	Consistent SC visual design	198	15.44	47.83
C3. Influential Advertising Symbols	Environmental or Ecology Related Symbols	283	23.27	68.36
	Abstract SC Symbols	129	10.61	31.16
	Cultural or Subculture Symbolic Symbols	221	18.17	53.38
	Emotionally Linked Symbols	239	19.65	57.73
	Value Resonance Symbols	158	12.99	38.16
	Trend or Brand Symbols	186	15.3	44.93
C4. Influential Advertising Symbolic Meanings	Identity/Value Identification	266	19.78	64.25
	Lifestyle/Personal Taste/Rituals	316	23.49	76.33
	Social Belonging/Status	234	17.4	56.52
	Emotions/Wishes/Desires	271	20.15	65.46
	Cultural or Historical	258	19.18	62.32

Cross-Tabulation (Chi-square) Analysis: Demographic Segmentation

The chi-square test results are shown in Chart 2, which shows that there are significant associations between demographic variables and preferences for different SCA design elements.

Age-based distinctions emerge as particularly salient, with the younger cohort (born 2001-2005) demonstrating a marked preference for artistically expressed visual design (50.77% vs. 31.31%, $p=0.000^{**}$) and celebrity/influencer endorsements (46.15% vs. 28.04%, $p=0.000^{**}$). This trend suggests a shift towards more dynamic, visually stimulating content that aligns with the digital native status of this subgroup (Janusz, 2020). The appeal of influencers to this demographic underscores the growing importance of parasocial relationships in shaping consumer behaviour, raising questions about the long-term implications of such marketing strategies for identity formation and social dynamics.

Conversely, the older segment's inclination towards emotionally resonant marketing (63.55% vs. 51.79%, $p=0.016^{*}$) hints at a more nuanced engagement with advertising content. This preference may reflect a desire for authenticity and deeper connection in an increasingly digitised world, challenging marketers to balance visual appeal with substantive emotional narratives (Ji & Lin, 2022). Gender differences in advertising reception offer further complexity to the analysis. Female respondents' heightened valuation of inclusive value symbols (44.00% vs. 26.62%, $p=0.001^{**}$) and lifestyle-reflective advertising (80.36% vs. 68.35%, $p=0.007^{**}$) suggests a more holistic approach to consumption decisions. This finding aligns with broader societal trends towards conscious consumerism and may indicate a growing expectation for brands to embody and communicate values beyond mere product attributes (Dodds et al., 2021). The stronger emotional resonance of advertisements among women (68.73% vs. 58.99%, $p=0.049^{*}$) further emphasised the potential for narrative-driven marketing strategies to forge deeper connections with this demographic (Chekima et al., 2016).

Occupational distinctions revealed intriguing patterns, particularly in the preferences of students. Their affinity for artistic expression in visual design (49.08% vs. 31.12%, $p=0.000^{**}$) and interactive elements (51.83% vs. 39.29%, $p=0.011^{*}$) reflected an engagement with cutting-edge aesthetic trends (Ji & Lin, 2022), possibly influenced by their immersion in academic environments that prioritise innovation and creativity. Surprisingly, students also showed a stronger preference for print advertising (65.14% vs. 44.39%, $p=0.000^{**}$), challenging assumptions about the decline of traditional media among younger audiences. This finding warrants further investigation into the role of print media in educational contexts and its potential to shape broader media consumption habits.

Income-based analysis revealed significant divergences in advertising preferences, with lower-income respondents ($\leq$ ¥3,500 monthly) showing a marked preference for function-oriented information design (70.05% vs. 57.00%, $p=0.006^{**}$). This pragmatic approach to advertising content suggests a focus on value and utility, potentially driven by economic constraints. The preference for traditional advertising channels among this group, including print (67.63% vs. 43.00%, $p=0.000^{**}$) and traditional media (51.21% vs. 39.61%, $p=0.018^{*}$), challenges the notion of a uniform shift towards digital platforms across all demographics. It also raises questions about digital access and literacy across income brackets within Generation Z.

The heightened influence of celebrity endorsements among lower-income groups (44.93% vs. 28.50%, $p=0.001^{**}$) presents a complex picture. This trend may reflect aspirational consumption patterns or a trust in familiar public figures as

sources of information. However, it also raises ethical considerations about the potential exploitation of economic vulnerabilities through celebrity-driven marketing (Castonguay, 2021).

Categories	Age		P
	1995 - 2000 (23 - 28 Year old) (%)	2001-2005 (18-22 Year Old) (%)	
Function-Oriented Information Design	58.88	69.23	0.030*
Artistic Expression Visual Design	31.31	50.77	0.000**
Celebrities or Influencer/KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders)	28.04	46.15	0.000**
Emotional Appeal (National Style/Nostalgia/Guilt, Etc)	63.55	51.79	0.016*

* $p < 0.005$ ** $p < 0.01$

Categories	Gender		P
	Male (%)	Female (%)	
Inclusive Value Symbols	26.62	44.00	0.001**
Lifestyle/Personal Tastes/Rituals	68.35	80.36	0.007**
Emotions/Wishes/Desires	58.99	68.73	0.049*

* $p < 0.005$ ** $p < 0.01$

Categories	Occupation		P
	Student (%)	Non Student (%)	
Artistic Expression Visual Design	49.08	31.12	0.000**
Celebrities or Influencer/KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders)	43.12	29.59	0.004**
Interaction (experience) Design	51.83	39.29	0.011**
Print Advertising	65.14	44.39	0.000**

* $p < 0.005$ ** $p < 0.01$

Chart 2: Chi-square analysis of demographic segmentation and design elements

Summary

This comprehensive analysis of the results provides valuable insights into the role of advertising, particularly symbolic advertising, in influencing sustainable consumption behaviours among Chinese Generation Z consumers. The study reveals a diverse Generation Z sample, with variations in age, gender, education, occupation, and income levels influencing sustainable consumption attitudes and behaviours. This diversity underscores the need for nuanced, targeted approaches to SCA.

A significant portion of the respondents have low exposure to SCA, indicating a need for more pervasive and memorable sustainability messaging. This gap in exposure presents both a challenge and an opportunity for advertisers and sustainability advocates. Symbolic advertising has strong potential to bridge the awareness-action gap in sustainable behaviours, particularly when incorporating cultural symbols and lifestyle elements.

Generation Z values practical, authentic, sustainable consumption content, challenging marketers to provide substantive messaging. Visual elements, especially icons and symbols, are highly effective in conveying sustainability messages to this demographic. Traditional media still holds some relevance, but digital and social media platforms are overwhelmingly preferred as the SCA delivery landscape.

Significant variations in SCA preferences exist across age, gender, occupation, and income segments, necessitating tailored approaches. Generation Z views sustainable consumption as an integral part of their identity and daily life, rather

than an isolated behaviour. This integration of sustainability in lifestyle presents opportunities and challenges for marketers and policymakers.

These findings have significant implications for various stakeholders. Marketers need to develop more sophisticated, targeted SCA strategies that blend authentic content, visual appeal, and cultural relevance. Policymakers should consider leveraging advertising as a tool to promote sustainable consumption behaviours among young consumers and support the development of affordable sustainable products. For researchers, this study opens up several avenues for future investigations, including exploring the long-term impact of symbolic advertising on sustainable consumption behaviours.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable consumption behaviours among Generation Z in China, offering novel insights into the effectiveness of various advertising design elements in promoting sustainability. The research addresses a critical gap in understanding how to effectively communicate sustainability messages to this influential demographic.

The study's key findings highlight the power of symbolic advertising in bridging the awareness-action gap in sustainable behaviours, particularly when cultural symbols and lifestyle elements are incorporated. Generation Z shows a strong preference for practical, authentic content delivered through visually appealing and culturally relevant channels. Digital and social media platforms have a significant influence in disseminating sustainability messages, while traditional media retains relevance for certain segments. Sustainable consumption is integrated into Generation Z's identity and daily life, suggesting a shift from isolated behaviours to lifestyle choices. The study also highlights the importance of tailoring sustainable consumption promotion strategies based on sociological, psychological, and semiotic considerations.

These findings extend semiotic advertising theory by showing how informational clarity and culturally resonant symbols jointly shape sustainable behaviours. They also provide empirical evidence on how message, visual, and symbolic elements interact to influence Gen Z, thus advancing design-level advertising research in non-Western contexts.

The study's results offer valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and educators aiming to promote sustainable consumption among Chinese Generation Z consumers. The findings suggest the need for a multifaceted communication strategy that leverages social media, influencer marketing, and user-generated content while providing practical, authentic information.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience and snowball sampling limits generalisability beyond educated, urban Gen Z cohorts. Second, reliance on self-reported perceptions may not fully capture behavioural outcomes. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference. Future studies should adopt experimental or longitudinal approaches and include more diverse demographic groups. Building on this study, future research could also refine symbolic categories and test integrated message–visual–symbol frameworks in practice.

In conclusion, this research provides a foundation for understanding and effectively engaging with Generation Z's values and communication preferences in the context of sustainable consumption. As this generation continues to gain purchasing power and influence, the insights gained from this study will be crucial for advancing sustainable consumption practices in China and beyond. The complex interplay of factors influencing Generation Z's sustainable consumption behaviours underscores the importance of ongoing research and adaptive strategies in this rapidly evolving field.

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