



**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG**  
**SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW**

*Making Sense of Cancel Culture in the Fashion Industry:  
A Qualitative Study of Gen Z Consumers*

Axel Fors & Anna Malmqvist

Supervisor: Ellen Gustafsson

Master's thesis in Marketing and Consumption

Spring 2025

Graduate School, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

## **Abstract**

The concept of cancel culture has emerged alongside the growth of social media, providing consumers with a platform to express dissatisfaction towards brands that engage in controversial practices. Consequently, this phenomenon significantly influences the marketplace where brands and consumers act. In this study, we examine how Generation Z consumers make sense of cancel culture within the fashion industry by conducting in-depth interviews. This with a focus on social and ecological sustainability using consumer culture theory as a framework. The findings show that cancel culture is perceived as a tool for consumers to hold brands accountable for unsustainable practices through social media and collective consumer actions. However, attitudes towards the phenomenon are divided and do not always align with behavior in the marketplace. Instead, Generation Z consumers make sense of cancel culture differently when interpreting its meaning to their own life and context, which illustrates its dynamic nature. This study contributes to a relatively unexplored research area and with valuable insights for brands and marketers about cancel culture within the fashion industry from a consumer perspective.

**Keywords:** Cancel culture, Fashion industry, Sustainability, Consumer Culture Theory, Interpretive Strategies

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## **1. Introduction**

This study aims to explore and illustrate Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers' perceptions of cancel culture and how these interpretations influence their behavior in the marketplace of canceled clothing brands, using a sociocultural approach. Such understanding is important for gaining deeper insight into how consumers construct meaning around cancel culture within the context of the fashion industry. The study addresses clothing brands that have been highlighted in social media with poor working conditions or practices of environmental harm, which is further used as the focus within cancel culture in this research.

A study written by Zimand-Sheiner and Lissitsa (2024) on the purchase intention of Gen Z in fast fashion illustrates that this generation is known for its ethical and conscientious values. This is as they grow up with an awareness of climate change and have demonstrated an interest in choosing more sustainable products. Nonetheless, the study also indicates that Gen Z consumers remain price-sensitive and are up-to-date with fashion trends (Zimand-Sheiner & Lissitsa, 2024). This aligns with Bläse et al., (2024), who describe fast fashion as the latest clothing trend rapidly produced to meet consumer demand at an affordable price commonly manufactured in low-wage countries. Furthermore, one significant driver of consumers purchasing behavior in the fashion industry is the fear of missing out (FOMO). This reflects consumers' fear of being left out of rewarding experiences that others are having, which could be explained by the desire for social connection and the need to be part of a group (Bläse et al., 2024). Similarly, Gen Z uses clothes to express identity and self-expression (Williams & Hodges, 2022). Additionally, the textile and

clothing sector has a negative impact on the environment due to the extreme utilization of raw materials and energy (Colasante et al., 2023). As a result of these environmental consequences associated with the consumption of clothes, a shift toward green products has emerged. These products are characterized by brands that make the commitment of saving energy, reducing pollution, fair working conditions, and avoiding using toxic substances (Colasante et al., 2023; Pontes et al., 2024). For instance, sustainable clothes can be identified with the help of certifications that highlight environmental and social justice. However, for this to be achievable brand practices and consumer behaviors play a crucial role (Colasante et al., 2023).

At the same time, Gen Z consumers have been raised in a world where information is easily accessible and digital devices are a central part of daily life. This makes the internet a primary source of information and individuals depend significantly on social media (Zimand-Sheiner & Lissitsa, 2024). Hence, consumer power has increased over time, because consumers' opinions and critique can more easily be spread to others through social media (Saldanha et al., 2023). Consequently, social media has given rise to cancel culture by providing a tool for consumers to influence brand practices (Saldanha et al., 2023). Cancel culture is a phenomenon that has gained significant recognition in recent years, although its roots can be traced back to earlier forms of public dissent (Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). Today, cancel culture can be described as the practice of consumers calling out and withdrawing their support from a brand through social media when the brand is perceived to behave morally wrong (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). According to Costa and Azevedo (2023), negative emotions also drive the cancellation process, resulting in the formation of a negative brand-consumer relationship, which has evolved into cancel culture.

The reason for cancellation varies, however, it is most often associated with a brand's engagement in controversial actions, which the public finds unacceptable (Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). As a recent example of cancel culture, the Swedish clothing brand Djerf Avenue has been accused of employing unethical methods. The company was previously recognized for its inclusivity and diversity initiatives, in contrast, employees and models have reportedly witnessed a problematic social working environment characterized by harassment in the office (Ekström, 2024). As a result, Djerf Avenue faced a backlash from consumers (Acheson, 2024), and both the brand and the co-founder Matilda Djerf lost a large amount of followers on social media (Karlsson, 2024). Similarly, consumers who once felt a strong connection to a brand might feel betrayed if they discover the brand has broken a value that matters to them (Zimand-Sheiner & Lissitsa, 2024). Consequently, this leads to negative effects for brands that don't follow ethical practices that align with the consumer's perception. With the use of social media, this can result in hating, shaming, or boycotting the brand (Saldanha et al., 2023).

Previous research has explored what defines the concept of cancel culture. This has included research on how cancel culture has emerged in a shift in power balance (Saldanha et al., 2023), studies on cancel culture focusing on a political ideology (Demsar et al., 2023), and studies examining the cancellation journey using a quantitative method (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). Consequently, we can identify a research gap in previous research as they lack focus on the understanding of cancel culture from a consumer's perspective using qualitative research design. Furthermore, Demsar et al., (2023), highlight that future research could examine cancel culture focusing on sustainability and conduct interviews to further gain insight into cancellations by understanding consumer's lived experiences. Thus, this study aims to explore how Gen Z consumers perceive cancel culture and how these interpretations influence their behavior in the marketplace. This by focusing on clothing brands with sustainability discourses and using consumer culture theory (CCT) as a framework. CCT will provide us with valuable insights and understandings of the cultural, social, and symbolic aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which is key to exploring the meaning of cancel culture within consumer behavior. For this, the following research question will be addressed: *How do Gen Z consumers make sense of cancel culture within the fashion industry?*

This will be conducted in the context of the fashion industry, as canceled clothing brands have gained high attention in Swedish society following the news about Djerf Avenue (Ekström, 2024), making it a relevant subject to explore. However, this study does not focus on Djerf Avenue specifically, but rather applies the research on the broader fashion market including several canceled brands. Moreover, to answer the research question the study applies a qualitative research method by conducting in-depth interviews with Swedish Gen Z consumers. This approach was chosen because qualitative methods are effective in exploring social phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), such as the cancel culture, where attitudes, perceptions, and emotions play a central role. The focus of this study is not to determine which clothing brands are considered canceled, instead the focus is on understanding how consumers make sense of cancel culture. The findings illustrated that consumers similarly perceive cancel culture as a tool for addressing brands' lack of sustainable practices, although their attitudes and behaviors towards canceled clothing brands differed when these messages were interpreted into consumers' personal lives and contexts.

The structure of this paper begins with a theoretical overview by defining the concept of cancel culture, how it has emerged, and its consequences. This is followed by relevant literature on consumer culture theory with a main focus on Hirschman & Thompson's (1997) interpretive strategies on consumer-media relationships. Next, we are presenting the research methodology including the study design, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness. We then present our findings and analysis based on the interviews, concluding with a discussion of the study's limitations leading to suggestions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Cancel Culture**

In recent years, the balance of power has shifted to become consumer-driven through the use of social media. This shift means that the power to influence companies has moved from traditionally authoritative groups, such as brands, celebrities and the media, to the general public. The increasing growth of social media has made it possible for consumers to use the platforms to criticize brands on practices that they consider unacceptable, which was power that they previously lacked (Saldanha et al., 2023). As a result, the phenomenon of cancel culture has emerged, becoming widely recognized in public debate since the 2020s throughout politics, culture and media, which have been earlier rooted in the Black Twitter community and the #MeToo Movement (Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023).

Cancel culture is defined as the practice of consumers expressing rejection and disapproval by withdrawing support for individuals or brands in public who are perceived to have said or behaved unethically (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). This is done by using social media to apply social pressure, with the aim of publicly shaming actors in society who have been untouchable by highlighting their guilt of morally wrong actions. To this, the cancel culture attempts to impact market change that has been created from negative feelings associated with brands (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). According to Demser et al., (2023), this is the cancellation process, which usually includes three key aspects: public shaming on social media, withdrawing support, and the desire for punishment.

However, cancel culture is not a new concept, instead, it has developed from previous practices of consumer resistance and boycotting. According to Penaloza and Price (1993), there are many forms of consumer resistance including different organizational dimensions, from individual to collective actions, as well as challenging the marketing system or reshaping product meanings. The aim is to change the meaning, power, or structure of markets, brands, products, and advertising by the practice of anti-consumption (Demsar et al., 2023; Penaloza & Price, 1993). This can be achieved through silently resisting, which highlights the individual practice of avoiding certain products or brands by adapting purchasing behavior. In contrast, active consumer resistance involves confrontational activities that desire change by collaborative attacks, sabotaging, or using negative word-of-mouth to collectively damage a brand image (Demsar et al., 2023). Another form of consumer rejection is boycotting, where consumers temporarily force a brand to change its activities as a consequence of perceived unethical behavior (Demsar et al., 2023). Additionally, this is associated with brand hate, which arises from negative emotions, for example, anger, disgust, or sadness making consumers motivated to actively oppose the brand by eventually giving bad reviews known as negative word-of-mouth (Abbasi et al., 2022).

The key characteristics that differentiate cancel culture from previous practices are firstly the presence of social media. Compared to boycotting in the past, canceling by social media makes the message spread rapidly with online communities. In contrast, a boycott cannot transfer the message as quickly (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). Secondly, cancel culture differs in motive and behavior by withdrawing all support for a brand that has a historically repeated failure to meet acceptable social and ethical standards. This is in order to stimulate market development to match current values in society as a new form of consumer resistance (Demsar et al., 2023). Lastly, the cancellation process is driven by permanent brand transgression. This involves an institutional impact where markets and marketing practices are reshaped as a long-term form of consumer resistance, rather than simply influencing individual business decisions, as boycotting normally does (Demsar et al., 2023).

Furthermore, one outcome of being canceled can lead to a dramatic shift in future sales and financial loss due to the complete withdrawal of loyalty and support from past and future consumers (Saldanha et al., 2023). The reputational damage may also result in sanctions from third parties, which will be challenging to recover from (Demsar et al., 2023). The threshold for when a brand is canceled is influenced by the characteristics that the brand is potentially lacking. These attributes include, for instance, friendliness, trustworthiness, intelligence, or capability. As a result, consumers feel less attached to the brand when they perceive it as lacking these qualities, which contributes to its cancellation (Saldanha et al., 2023). In contrast, when consumers have a strong emotional attachment to a brand, they are less likely to engage in cancellation activities. This is primarily applicable when the product or brand in question has no substitutes (Saldanha et al., 2023). Similarly, consumers who are more likely to forgive unethical behavior are also more likely to increase their purchase intention from the brand again if the brand apologizes. On the other hand, the brand faces difficulties in reaching its initial sales levels following the scandal, and this will continue until the consumers are satisfied with the brand's actions to address the issues that led to its cancellation (Costa & Azevedo, 2023).

In this study, cancel culture is defined in alignment with Costa & Azevedo (2023), Demsar et al. (2023), and Saldanha et al. (2023), with a specific focus on consumers canceling clothing brands that act unethically from a sustainability perspective with the use of social media. This refers to brands within the fashion industry that have been canceled due to poor social and environmental sustainability, such as problematic working conditions or environmental harm. These brands stand in contrast with the concept of sustainable marketing, which promotes long-term practices of economic, environmental and social sustainability (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Consequently, individuals cancel these brands on social media due to their unethical and unsustainable practices (Demsar et al., 2023).

## **2.2 Consumer-media relationships**

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is an interdisciplinary framework in marketing and consumer behavior that aims to understand consumption choices from a social and cultural perspective. Instead of being defined by a single overarching theory, CCT embraces a range of perspectives that explore the complex relationships between consumer behaviors, market dynamics, and cultural meanings (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). By this, research within the field addresses the symbolic value embedded in consumption choices (Arnold & Thompson, 2005), in contrast to early consumption research focused primarily on the economic system (Warde, 2014). Thus, CCT explores how meanings are distributed across social contexts and how consumers interpret and express these meanings within specific social positions and relationships (Arnold & Thompson, 2005).

Similarly, consumption has become a medium for individuals and groups to express their identity using symbolic representation in taste and lifestyle (Warde, 2014), emphasizing that consumption is not only about satisfying functional needs (Arnold & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1986). Traditional values such as price, quality, and durability are still in consideration (Levy, 1959), nonetheless, consumers focus on symbolism rather than material reward (Warde, 2014). Furthermore, different social groups are shaping and reshaping cultural values in the market by their actions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1986). In this framework, culture is seen as heterogeneous (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), meaning each culture has its distinctive understanding of the world. Consequently, this creates different cultural frameworks for how individuals within the culture behave in the market (McCracken, 1986).

Building on this, the term “culture of consumption” refers to a system of commercial images, texts, and objects that groups use to construct identities, practices, and meanings to make sense of their environments (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kozinets, 2001). In addition, researchers emphasize the active and cyclical dynamics of consumer-media relationships (Hall 1980; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997) and address the influence of how consumers’ background knowledge shapes the meaning in advertising (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Mick & Buhl, 1992). According to Hall (1980), the consumer's coding process of media is not passive but rather characterized as active in shaping the meaning of messages. Consumers frequently interpret advertising for meaning rather than information (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1987). Thus, the interpreted meaning of an advertisement is constructed with the various references consumers apply to make sense of the media message. These references are key for understanding how consumers engage with media messages (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997), which are grounded in their personal experience and knowledge of their occupation, gender, age, social class, lifestyle, and ethnicity (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1987). Hence, a model for understanding consumers' interpretive relationships with mass media has emerged (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

The model by Hirschman & Thompson (1997) includes three interpretive strategies that consumers apply to form relationships with the mass media: (1) inspiring and aspiring, (2) deconstructing and rejecting, and (3) identifying and individualizing. This is to understand the constructed relationship between consumers and media vehicles such as media images, symbols, and text on mass media channels. Within each interpretive strategy is a complex range of personal meanings, self-perceptions, and cultural beliefs that enable mass media images to become relevant for consumers' lived environments (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

### ***2.2.1 Inspiring and Aspiring***

The first interpretive strategy by Hirschman and Thompson (1997) is "*inspiring and aspiring*". This highlights an emulating consumer-media relationship involving the consumer interpreting media images as representations of an ideal self (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). According to Hirschman and Thompson (1997), salient media images are seen as sources of inspiration as they represent an ideal that consumers aspire to achieve. Although these messages seem to be unattainable, it does not generate frustration, rather, it makes consumers more inspired to work towards their goals. As a result, the media message becomes a motivation that encourages meaningful personal value. Moreover, the striving for the ideal is equated with the striving to become one's best self, with the media serving as a concrete benchmark to measure personal growth (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

### ***2.2.2 Deconstructing and Rejecting***

The second interpretive strategy is "*deconstructing and rejecting*". This approach emphasizes a critical consumer-media relationship, which contrasts with the first strategy of inspiring and aspiring. In this strategy, consumers perceive media images as unattainable constructions and engage with mass media by open criticism, which highlights unrealistic representations portrayed in media (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Furthermore, the term deconstructing is used by Hirschman and Thompson (1997) to demonstrate that consumers use their general cultural knowledge, which enables them to better understand media messages by considering multiple perspectives. Rejecting is additionally a logical extension of deconstructing, thereby leading consumers to reject the media message and its underlying meanings (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

### ***2.2.3 Identifying and Individualizing***

The last interpretive strategy, "*identifying and individualizing*," is characterized as an empathetic and personalized consumer-media relationship (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). This emphasizes that media vehicles are interpreted in relation to consumers' personal histories, how others within their social group perceive them, and their beliefs about their own identity. Building on this, consumers decontextualize media images from their original contexts and recontextualize them in ways that align with their personal lives, self-conceptions and social environments. This process highlights how consumers adopt an analytic orientation toward

media messages, such as advertisements, and adapt aspects they perceive as relevant for themselves (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

Moreover, Hirschman & Thompson (1997) claims that identifying as interpretive strategy consists of two key dimensions: (1) the media image is understood as conveying a desirable value or meaning, and (2) the consumer intentionally identifies with (or emulates) the image as a way of confirming that he or she holds the desired value or meaning. Furthermore, individualisation in this strategy represents consumers' desire to create unique identities. At the same time, they adapt to the cultural code presented in the mass media, which consequently creates a paradox of contemporary society (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Similarly, Arnould & Thompson (2005) express the meanings embedded in products and different consumption patterns and how these meanings contribute to identifying formations and social relations. This perspective highlights how consumption has evolved into a form of communication, using signs to express that they are part of a group with similar lifestyles, consumption habits, or values (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This aligns with Levy (1959), who argues that “*people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean*” (p. 118).

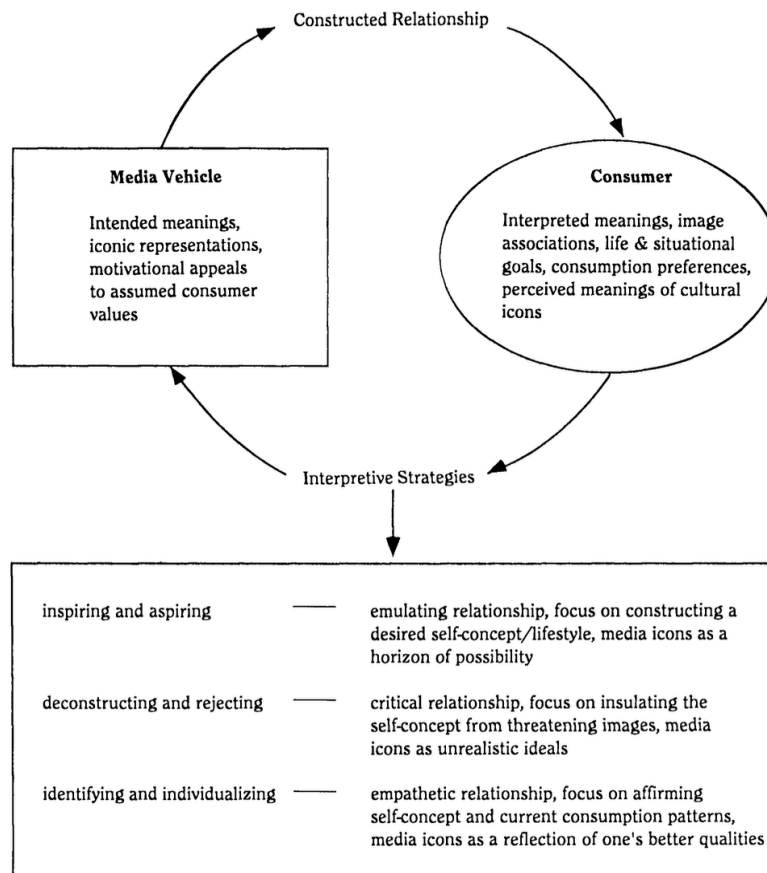


Figure 1. Interpretive Strategies Used to Create Consumer-Media Relationships (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

The interpretive strategies model by Hirschman & Thompson (1997), used to understand consumer-media relationships, will further be applied in this study to analyze strategies that consumers use to make sense of cancel culture. By focusing on Gen Z consumers' perception of cancel culture from a social and cultural perspective. This model will help us understand how they perceive and respond to cancelled fashion brands that lack sustainability practices.

### **3. Methodology**

The aim of this study was to explore how Gen Z consumers perceive cancel culture in relation to clothing brands that are canceled due to difficulties in fulfilling sustainable standards. To fulfill this purpose, we adopted a qualitative research approach which was suitable to gain a deeper understanding of cancel culture as a social phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In addition, this approach was chosen as we identified a gap in the previous research, particularly in terms of qualitative research from a consumer's perspective on cancel culture (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). Moreover, by conducting a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews we have gained a deeper understanding of the meanings and attitudes of Gen Z consumers, which has given us new insights into cancel culture within the fashion industry.

Furthermore, this study applied an ontological philosophy, which highlights the idea of understanding reality as socially constructed and subjective. This perspective emphasizes that the relationship between individuals and society, as well as their perceptions and experiences, can vary from each other and change over time (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008). To analyze these subjective perceptions, we further used a hermeneutic approach. This means using our prior knowledge of the subject to shape our interpretations of the interviews to make meaning within a larger cultural consumption context (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008).

#### **3.1 Data collection and sampling**

In this study, the respondents were selected with a purposive sampling to align with the purpose of the study, hence the requirement for participating in the interviews was that the respondents were familiar with the concept of cancel culture and belonged to Gen Z. We chose Gen Z because we consider that they are more familiar with social and digital activism. This aligns with Ahmad and Wilkins (2025), who emphasize that the strength of purposive sampling lies in the ability to select participants who provide an in-depth understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Similarly, Goulding (2005) describes how the participants should have lived the experience in order to make the selection purposive.

Moreover, a total of 14 interviews were conducted with Swedish consumers for the data collection stage of the study. To ensure a diverse sample, individuals from both genders participated in the interviews, with 7 men and 7 women taking part, to gain a more accurate representation of reality. The final sample size was determined based on the principle of

theoretical saturation meaning that no new insight was found during the last interview (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008). The length of our interviews was between 30-55 minutes and they were conducted with a semi-structured approach. By using semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions were asked to give valuable insights beyond the initial questions (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008), as each interview was partly adapted according to the respondent's perception, attitude, and decision-making towards a canceled brand. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted using Zoom calls, as the interviewers and interviewees were in different locations. By using Zoom, we were also able to record the interview with good audio quality in a calm and quiet environment, which made the transcription process easier. However, we acknowledge that there is a limitation in conducting digital interviews as it affects our ability to fully recognize non-verbal communication cues such as body language (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008).

RESPONDENTS	OCCUPATION	AGE
Agnes	Marketing student	27
Ebba	Psychology student	23
Carl	Engineer	28
Daniel	Management student	23
Joel	Accountant	27
Gustav	Management student	26
Maja	Marketing student	23
Clara	Criminologist	24
Hugo	Warehouse	26
Astrid	Teacher education student	24
Adam	Accounting student	28
Oliva	Marketing student	26
Alma	Digital design student	23
Liam	Car Dealer	25

*Table 1. List of respondents*

In the interview guide, topics and questions were included with a main focus on the research purpose and designing open-ended questions. After finalizing the interview guide, but before conducting the official interviews, we did a test interview to see if we could improve any questions. The test interview was conducted with one participant who was excluded from the study. Our goal with the test interview aligns with Bell et al., (2019), and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) as they state the importance of a test interview to make changes if needed. This test interview gave us insights into how we could conduct the interviews in the best possible way. Such as asking the questions in a well-structured order or clarifying questions if something was unclear for the respondent. This process was necessary and helpful as some small adjustments were made to the interview guide after the test interview.

### **3.2 Data analysis**

The data analysis began as we verbatim transcribed all the interviews directly after each session in order to minimize memory gaps and loss of information. This aligns with the idea of transcription used in business studies to illustrate transparency and represent what is being said

directly (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Additionally, continuously transcribing interviews allowed us to see directions about emerging themes without performing detailed coding in the initial stages of the data analysis. This approach was flexible and allowed adjustment between data collection and analysis (Bankel, 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Spiggle, 1994). The transcripts were further used as the foundation for our empirical material that we started to officially code after all interviews were conducted by identifying patterns from the interviews.

The coding process was guided by Spiggle's (1994), analytic operations where categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, and iteration were applied. We started to code the data manually by identifying different categorizations. According to Spiggle (1994), categorization aims to analyze the data by defining words or sentences in the text that are connected with the research phenomenon. We applied this using different coloring highlights on all transcripts one by one of keywords or phrases, which indicated a specific theme that summarized the respondents' perception, attitude, or experience regarding cancel culture. Built on these identified themes, the abstraction goes from the close empirical data to conceptual understanding (Spiggle, 1994). Simultaneously, the comparison process started by exploring similarities and differences between the collected data. This means that comparisons are applied to relate themes to one another and new conceptual patterns of similarity and difference can emerge (Bankel, 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Spiggle, 1994). As a result, we analyzed the data to identify variations within these themes. Dimensionalization was then applied as we analyzed how our respondents differed in their understanding of cancel culture and its meaning related to our research purpose. These dimensions helped to explore how attitudes and behaviors toward cancel culture varied across individuals.

Continuing, in this study we conducted an abductive approach, meaning we applied a mix of both deductive and inductive techniques during the research process (Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008). This approach allowed us to maintain an open mind during the analytical process, enabling a more in-depth exploration of our studied topic without being restricted by predefined theoretical frameworks. Thus, moving back and forth between stages characterized an iteration process (Spiggle, 1994), where insights from early analysis informed the theoretical framework and developed the research question.

### **3.3 Ethical consideration**

For this study, we considered several ethical principles when conducting our research regarding data collection, data analysis and use of digital tools. For data collection, we gave all the interviewees instructions about informed consent and voluntary participation. This illustrates that the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and its procedures including that the interviewees only needed to be part of the research based on voluntary grounds (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). We applied this by asking for the interviewee's consent to participate in the

study before conducting the interview. This included explaining the purpose of the paper, that the research will be published online for the public and the aim of recording the interviews.

Furthermore, to protect the informants' privacy we took confidentiality and anonymity into consideration in the data analysis. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), confidentiality and anonymity represent to protect interviewees' identity and that all personal data can not be accessed by anyone unauthorized. Thus, the records from all interviews were deleted after being analyzed to prevent the recording from being shared or misused. We also anonymized all interviewees by using fictitious names instead of using the respondents' real names to protect individual integrity.

Ethical considerations have further been applied in the use of digital tools. For this study, we have applied language editing tools such as Grammarly, DeepL and ChatGPT for language support. This means that we have used these programs with the aim of improving readability by using grammar correction and finding synonyms. As a result, this has been applied by improving our own written text without changing the meaning. By this, we highlight that we have not used AI tools to generate any new content or text, as well as, we have not used generative AI for analysis of the interviews.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research is often criticized for being too unsystematic and subjective. To address this criticism, we used Eriksson and Kovalainen's (2008) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The credibility criteria highlight the need for data to be logical in connection with our theory and collected data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). We fulfilled this criteria by understanding cancel culture from previous research, which guided the interview questions. Secondly, transferability according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) means that the findings have to be compared to previous research in order to be confirmed. Our findings align with previous research (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). Furthermore, dependability has been applied by the methodological chapter as the reader can follow the research process such as how the categorization of the themes emerged, which aligned with Eriksson and Kovalainen's (2008) dependability criteria. Lastly, conformability is being fulfilled as we have been transparent when presenting and doing interpretations from our data. We also used citations in the analysis section together with summaries of the answers. We have highlighted similarities and differences in the respondents' answers in relation to the selected theoretical framework. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), this illustrates that our findings are not imaginations.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

In the following, we present and analyze the findings from our interviews, focusing on how Gen Z consumers perceive and interpret messages of cancel culture within the fashion industry. This is based on the respondents' answers, which will guide the structure of the analysis including three different sections. This is further illustrated in Figure 2 which first explores how respondents themselves define cancel culture and what they consider to be included in the concept. This provides background knowledge that forms a basis for understanding their later positions and responses. Secondly, the figure illustrates that respondents express value-based attitudes towards cancel culture. This means that the respondents could be identified as either supportive or critical of the phenomenon. Lastly, the figure shows how respondents interpret cancel culture messages and position themselves to them on the market. This applied regardless of their attitude towards the concept of cancel culture. Furthermore, canceled clothing brands that were frequently mentioned by the respondents were SHEIN, H&M, and Djerf Avenue. However, the view of these brands is not the primary focus of this study but serves as relevant examples selected by the respondents themselves through their own experiences of canceled brands.

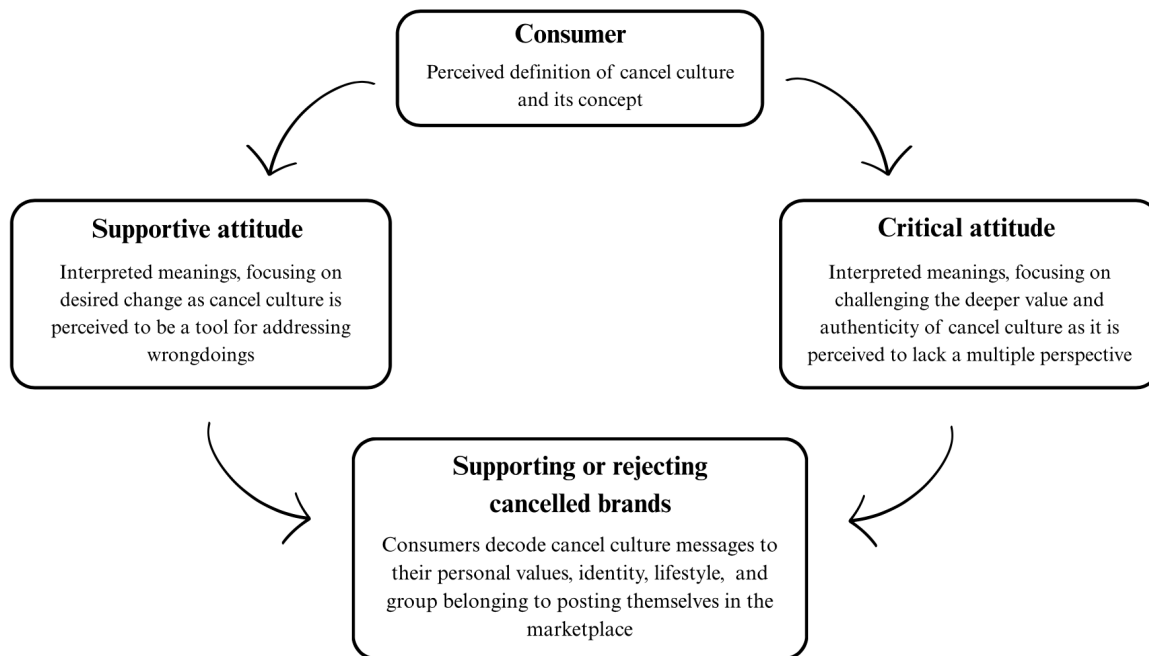


Figure 2. Summary of findings and analysis

### 4.1 Gen Z Consumers' understanding of Cancel Culture

All the respondents explain cancel culture as when clothing brands act or make problematic statements that cause consumers to react. According to the respondents, brands unethical behaviors are primarily acknowledged on social media, where fashion brands may face a wave of

criticism and public backlash, consequently leading consumers to stop supporting the brand. This understanding is illustrated in the answers from Agnes and Ebba.

It's when a company or person has messed up or done something wrong. People might choose to unfollow them or stop buying from the brand. They might also join discussions on social media - Agnes

To me, cancel culture means that a company has done something that is not positive, leading people to distance themselves from anything associated with the company in various ways - Ebba

From these findings, cancel culture appears to be primarily understood as a response to the brand's unethical behaviors. Consequently, consumers withdraw their support through activities such as no longer purchasing or wearing clothes from the brand or following them on social media. This definition aligns with Costa and Azevedo (2023), who describe cancel culture as the practice when consumers withdraw support based on negative associations with the brand commonly on social media to a brand that has misbehaved.

Furthermore, the respondents view cancel culture to be considerably influential due to the reach of social media. According to the respondents, social media is a key source of information, making these platforms a powerful tool for consumers to rapidly spread messages to encourage other consumers to stop supporting brands that are being canceled, which aligns with Saldanha et al. (2023) and Zimand-Sheiner and Lissitsa (2024). In this context, social media can be seen as a media vehicle, a term used by Hirschman and Thompson (1997), to describe mass media channels through which messages are communicated. These include the messages, symbols, and narratives that consumers encounter in relation to cancel culture. For instance, social media backlashes and companies' apologies, represent the media expressions consumers interpret and react to. In line with this, cancel culture aims to influence market change using social media to create social pressure (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). This point is further emphasized in the respondents' statements below.

Cancel culture is a relatively new phenomenon that is very or is becoming very influential thanks to social media. Which causes customers or individuals to avoid being associated with something such as brands that has been cancelled - Carl

I believe cancel culture has grown partly from the combination with social media that makes it possible to reach people you don't know. TikTok is a great weapon if you want to reach millions of people you don't have contact with - Daniel

The first thing that comes to my mind about cancel culture is that you get a different image of a company that has done something wrong and you feel that you don't want to support it anymore. People appear to be tougher nowadays, and there seems to be a very harsh culture among consumers. There is also a greater stigma attached to being someone who still shops at cancelled brand, as you might face criticism yourself - Maja

Additionally, this indicates that cancel culture is understood to be driven by social media, highlighting its power in shaping public discourse and consumer behavior. This as social media provides users with a platform to call out brands that act problematically, which significantly influences others to take similar actions in response to public criticism. This can be connected to Saldanha et al., (2023), who describe a shift in the balance of power from the society's elite to ordinary consumers to influence companies' business activities through social media engagement. Consequently, cancel culture also indicates to be understood as a consumer-driven phenomenon because of the active role consumers have in both producing and receiving messages. In the same way, Hall (1980) and Hirschman & Thompson (1997), claim that the consumer-media relationship in mass media communication is a dynamic process where meaning is shaped and reshaped. Consumers should not be seen as passive audiences, instead, seen as producers of perceived meanings (Hall, 1980). This perspective applies to the respondents' understanding of cancel culture, as they not only consume media content about canceled brands passively, but actively interpret and act upon it.

## **4.2 Divided Attitudes towards Cancel Culture**

Although the respondents are perceived to have a similar understanding of cancel culture can we see differences in the respondents' attitudes towards the phenomenon. To analyze the nuances in these attitudes, the model by Hirschman & Thompson (1997) will be used to interpret how *inspiring and aspiring* and *deconstructing and rejecting* interpretive strategies are used by consumers to interpret cancel culture messages.

### ***4.2.1 Inspiring and Aspiring***

Several respondents explain that they see cancel culture as a positive phenomenon as criticism is to be expected when brands engage in practices that are perceived to be misaligned with consumers' values. Here the respondents highlight a lack of sustainable actions such as poor working conditions or practices that harm the environment, which makes a brand cancelled. Furthermore, they claim that to be able to attain sustainability objectives set by society, companies have a responsibility to align with stated commitments. Therefore, these respondents express that fashion brands should be acknowledged and they strongly consider cancel culture as a tool for holding brands accountable when they do not fulfill sustainability practices, which Adam and Gustav emphasize.

I definitely see cancel culture as something positive. I believe fair conditions are a must. I don't think we should accept poor working conditions or child labor, which is why I believe companies should be held accountable - Adam

I think cancel culture is absolutely right. If companies act in a way that doesn't align with your values or behave in a way that feels unethical or inhumane, then I think it's fair that they are held accountable. When companies don't act responsibly, I don't think it's sustainable and it feels very outdated - Gustav

By this, it appears that they value ethical and moral considerations in line with Zimand-Sheiner and Lissitsa (2024). This further acts as a driving force to hold companies accountable when they fail to uphold these values. The positive respondents' view also indicates that they perceive cancel culture to be an inspiring movement. Hence, these respondents seem to use an inspiring and aspiring interpretive strategy (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). This is because the process of cancel culture exposes fashion brands that do not operate at an acceptable sustainable level. Consequently, the message communicated serves as a source of inspiration for consumers to distance themselves from unethical brands or to push canceled brands to develop. According to Hirschman and Thompson (1997), media messages within the inspiring and aspiring strategy represent ideals that consumers aspire to achieve, which in the context of cancel culture means that consumers perceive messages encouraging responsible behavior. Consequently, cancel culture inspires consumers to reconsider their relationship with clothing brands that do not align with their ideals.

Furthermore, respondents who are supportive of cancel culture argue that the public shame of creating humiliating memes is justified in order to illustrate that right is right and wrong is wrong. According to Demser et al., (2023), a part of cancel culture includes highlighting public shame on the company using social media. By this, cancel culture is not only about consumers withdrawing support but also about demands for punishment. Thus, the positive respondents' view aligns with the three aspects of the cancellation process: public shame, withdrawal support, and desire to exclude actors that break social rules (Demser et al., 2023). This is further, applicable to Maja who considers the cancellation of Djerf Avenue and the memes about the situation to be humorous and justified.

I thought the memes about Djerf Avenue were funny. Maybe that's a bit insensitive but if she hasn't been kind, why should she be treated with respect? Even if Matilda Djerf is just a girl without higher management education, there was still more she could have done to prevent things from going wrong. That's why I think the criticism is fair and I think cancel culture can be a good thing. Of course, death threats are never justified. But reacting in the moment I think is totally fine - Maja

The findings illustrate that consumers interpret cancel culture messages, such as memes, with discourses of humor and public shaming to critique brands' problematic behaviors. In this case, Djerf Avenue became highlighted for poor working conditions characterized by bullying in the office (Ekström, 2024). Memes were created in response to this and the findings show that these respondents are supportive of this because they distinguish between threatening content and humorous criticism. The humorous form of critique is thus understood to be approved to foster awareness and inspire actions, as long as it focuses on promoting ethical transformation. This reflects using an inspiring and aspiring interpretation strategy (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997), where consumers use media engagement of memes as a tool for interpreting ethical aspirations. Here memes rapidly spread to a broad audience and contribute to awareness, which is consistent with key aspects of cancel culture (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023).

#### ***4.2.2 Deconstructing and Rejecting***

Continuing, other respondents have a critical view of cancel culture and describe the phenomenon as problematic. The respondents expressed that they are skeptical of some aspects of cancel culture. For instance, several explained that they see a risk in how disinformation can be shared due to a lack of source criticism among users of social media. As such, the cancellations may sometimes be based on false narratives resulting in serious consequences for brands, which Hugo illustrates in his answer.

It can be beneficial when a wide audience quickly becomes aware of a serious issue. But sometimes it can also be harmful to companies when people don't check the facts properly before expressing their opinions. When the full story isn't clear, the reaction can be disproportionate and potentially damage a company's reputation over something that is minor or misunderstood - Hugo

This comment shows that the respondents perceive that it is important to critically analyze messages that individuals are exposed to, which reflects adopting a reflective and questioning stance toward cancel culture. This aligns with the strategy of deconstructing and rejecting as this strategy involves consumers actively questioning and criticizing the unrealistic or misleading representations in media (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). The respondents engage in this strategy by challenging the authenticity and motives behind cancel culture messages and revealing their potential to distort reality and unfairly punish innocent brands. Thus, emphasizes how consumers interpret media messages about cancellation for its meaning rather than information (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1987). In this case, the respondent's skepticism reflects not only a critique of cancel culture but also applies deeper awareness of how media messages can be manipulated and misunderstood in the public discourse. This aligns with Hirschman and Thompson's (1997), use of deconstructing and rejecting as the finding of this study indicates that respondents use their general cultural knowledge to understand media narratives using multiple perspectives that consequently tend to reject cancel culture messages.

Another perspective expressed by the skeptical respondents is that cancel culture has evolved in a way that often escalates beyond criticism and turns into hate. One key aspect of the cancellation process involves public shame on social media (Demser et al., 2023), which contrasts with the skeptical respondents' attitude about the phenomenon. Instead, they emphasize that everyone can make mistakes, without reaching the point where a canceled brand is unable to make a comeback as content easily becomes viral through social media. This aligns with Costa & Azevedo (2023), who describe that one of the key characteristics of cancel culture is its presence on social media, which differentiates cancel culture from an original boycott as it lacks the ability to transfer the message fast online. Moreover, this more punitive aspect of cancellation was strongly questioned by the respondents, they pointed out that the situation was often simplified, particularly through the creation of harmful memes or social media content that ignores the wider context. Therefore can this critique also be linked to Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) deconstructing and rejecting strategy as this approach captures how individuals actively choose to question and criticize the messages and motives behind media representations. This critical stance is shown by Liam and Astrid as they are questioning the fairness and accuracy of how cancelled brands are being portrayed online.

I think it becomes too much when there's a personal witch hunt against individuals. Sitting behind a screen and writing nasty things just leads to a lot of hate. People seem to enjoy seeing others fail and it turns into this thing where they just want to bring people down - Liam

I think it's completely wrong to make hateful memes because there's still a person behind the company. It's just that, for example, Djerf Avenue has come into the spotlight. There are probably plenty of other companies with similar issues that haven't been exposed yet. People don't know what's happening behind the scenes and making jokes about someone like that... it's actually pretty brutal - Astrid

Liam and Astrid's statements reflect a deeper awareness of how media narratives are constructed. Instead of passively accepting cancel culture as just a form of social responsibility, the respondents use their cultural knowledge to deconstruct it (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). By doing this, they question the intentions, ethical aspects, and possible consequences of cancel culture. Their rejection of harmful online behavior exemplifies the distancing dimension of this strategy, in which the individuals reject the influence of the media and advocate a more nuanced, empathetic approach to cancel culture messages.

#### **4.3 Meaning-Making and Positioning in Cancel Culture Messages**

Furthermore, to understand how cancel culture messages create meaning we analyze the respondents' engagement in either supporting or avoiding canceled brands. This involves

examining how the respondents explain their consumption choices and how consumers' personalized interpretations of cancel culture messages influence their self-positioning in the marketplace. For this, we will apply the third interpretive strategy: *identifying and individualizing* (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997).

#### **4.3.1 Identifying and Individualizing**

Several respondents describe that they have rejected or stopped purchasing from a clothing brand at least once after witnessing cancel culture from a brand that has been canceled on social media. This is illustrated by Clara who explains her experience.

When it comes to brands like SHEIN, I completely distance myself and don't buy from them. I think they're problematic on several levels. I don't want to support that as they completely go against my values both in terms of the environment and working conditions - Clara

The findings imply that the respondents in this study evaluate their clothing consumption in relation to personal values regarding environmental and labor ethics. This reflects the identifying and individualizing strategy described by Hirschman and Thompson (1997), in which consumers interpret media and brand messages in relation to their own identity and beliefs. In this case, the respondents see canceled brands representing values that conflict with their own. Consequently, the respondent defines themselves in contrast to the canceled brand leading to rejection, which highlights the two key dimensions within identifying strategy (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). However, a few respondents stated that they have continued to support a canceled fashion brand despite direct criticism, as revealed by Astrid's answer.

Unfortunately, I can say that I haven't distanced myself because I have definitely bought from SHEIN after it was announced that you shouldn't support them - Astrid

Additionally, Astrid continues by explaining that she does not actively engage in cancellations partly due to her living in what she describes as a protected society far away from where the environmental harm is happening. Hence, she argues that it is hard for consumers to understand how serious some situations are, making it easier to focus on themselves and the desire to purchase new clothes. This perception of cancel culture can further indicate that consumers decontextualize what they see about canceled brands online and recontextualize the meaning into their lifestyle and social environments (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). In this case, the respondents' view indicates that they are aware of the brand's criticism, nonetheless, the respondents do not perceive this information as relevant or influential in their personal consumption choices. This connects with Hirschman & Thompson's (1997) description of identifying and individualizing interpretive strategy of adapting media images to be relevant for themselves, which emphasizes the active process consumers have in decoding media messages (Hall, 1980). Similarly, Hugo and Alma explain their perspective of choosing to continue

supporting brands that have been canceled as they decode media messages with their lifestyle and self-perceptions.

I still stick to what I personally like. The product itself, not what's behind it. If there was a company that got into trouble it could affect me, but in general it's not something I reflect on very much - Hugo

At the end of the day, I choose what I want to buy and I have to bear the consequences. For me, it doesn't really matter what others think. As long as I know what I stand for, people can judge me if they want. But I think it's hard to draw any conclusions based on what clothes someone is wearing - Alma

In this way, the finding indicates that some respondents see clothing as something they wear focusing on the practical function rather than reflecting a deeper value. This illustrates that traditional values are still in consideration (Levy, 1959), and conflicts with the idea that consumers focus on symbolic meaning within products (Arnold & Thompson, 2005; Levy, 1959; Warde, 2014). In this case, messages about canceled brands are interpreted by the respondents with their own preferences thereby creating a unique consumer identity not constructed by collective judgments created on social media. This approach hence reflects an identifying and individualizing strategy that is characterized by personalized consumer-media relationships in decoding messages relevant to themselves (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

From another perspective, several respondents who have canceled a clothing brand explain that their decision was influenced by others in their social group distancing themselves or by societal pressure, which led them to adopt similar actions. This reflects consumption as a medium for individuals and groups to express identity and symbolism in similar lifestyles, consumption choices, or tastes (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Warde, 2014). By this, the respondents claim that it is easier to follow the group to be sure to avoid criticism when interpreting cancel culture messages, which Daniel explains.

I avoid cancelled brands because I don't have to defend myself, and it's just easier to avoid the problem altogether by buying something else. There are so many clothing substitutes out there. And that to me is the real issue, the harder it is to replace a product, the harder it becomes for people to take a stand - Daniel

The findings align with the idea that when there are substitutes on the market individuals are more likely to cancel those brands, which also highlights the difficulties in cancelling a brand where there are no substitutes (Saldanha et al., 2023). In the same way, this behavior indicates that consumers interpret messages related to cancel culture not only through a personal lens but also through perceived social perceptions, aligning with identifying and individualizing strategy

(Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Consequently, the fear of receiving criticism indicates that consumers agree with broader collective decisions, demonstrating how meaning is integrated into products and contributes to shaping social relations (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). Likewise, some respondents noted that their fear of being judged by others is partly due to the viral nature of cancel culture, which makes it trendy to be aware of ethical considerations and resist cancelled brands. According to Bläse et al., (2024), a key influence on consumer behavior in the fashion industry is FOMO, which raises a willingness to adapt to group behavior. The same idea can further be applied to consumer behavior in the context of canceled fashion brands. This phenomenon illustrates a paradox of contemporary society, as highlighted by Hirschman & Thompson (1997) consumers seek individuality while simultaneously adapting to the cultural codes represented in media. In line with this, Ebba explains her choice of not wearing a canceled clothing brand that is easily recognized by others, despite her own opinion that sustainability is not one of her priorities when buying clothes.

I probably wouldn't have worn it in public. I would have just worn it at home, because I don't want to be judged - Ebba

Furthermore, several respondents say that when brands take action and implement improvements based on the criticism, it becomes easier for them to start supporting a cancelled brand again. According to Costa and Azevedo (2023), when a cancelled brand apologizes consumers are more likely to forgive the brand and when the brand no longer lacks characteristics that led to its cancellation, sales levels will start to grow (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). This further aligns with Joel's description below.

I would say that the mistakes that caused the company to be cancelled must be addressed. They have to show transparency in what actions they are taking. It is not enough to just apologize in order to regain trust after facing criticism - Joel

Consequently, this illustrates that not only do consumers play a significant role in shaping cancel culture messages, but it also emphasizes the importance of how consumers decode brands' approach to being canceled. Highlighting the dynamic process of consumer-media relationships (Hall, 1980; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). From this, it appears that different clothing brands may have different cancellation processes that last for various lengths of time. This becomes evident when the respondents convey that they will continue to cancel the brand when they don't change and repeatedly fail to reach sustainable aspects. In contrast, a brand that takes responsibility and demonstrates change will make the cancellation less severe or active for a shorter time period. This connects to Saldanha et al., (2023), who state that when a brand lacks characteristics such as trustworthiness and capability, consumers are likely to engage in cancellation due to limited attachment to the brand, which Olivia emphasizes in her answer highlighting her experience of the difference between the cancellation of SHEIN and H&M.

It feels like SHEIN gets a lot of criticism all the time, but no one takes responsibility for it. I have never seen any employee from the company respond publicly or address the issues. While H&M still tries to show that they're making improvements. It's hard to know if that's true, but they at least mention in the media and on their website that they're working towards certain goals. They take a bit more responsibility and are more transparent so it does have an impact - Olivia

This observation can additionally be understood through the lens of identifying and individualizing strategy (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997), where consumers form personalized connections with media in relation to personal values. In this case, when a brand demonstrates responsiveness to consumer criticism, the brand illustrates characteristics that the respondents value resulting in a deeper emotional attachment. This further minimizes the need for cancelling the brand (Saldanha et al., 2023). This suggests that cancel culture functions as a tool, which consumers interpret brand dynamics and navigate their environments in alignment with the concept of consumer culture as a system of commercial symbols used to construct identities, practices, and meaning (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kozinets, 2001).

In addition, there are several respondents who express the importance of distancing themselves from cancelled brands, although they also highlight the difficulty of being consistent in their behavior. Here, Gustav, Adam, and Maja explain their experience.

If you take H&M as an example, you know there are flaws and you're a bit more critical of it but unfortunately you still end up buying clothes there because of the low prices. Of course, not everyone wants to spend a lot of money on clothes. In that case, you prioritize your own interests over other things - Gustav

H&M is one of those chains where everything is very cheap, which makes it easy to keep shopping there. Whereas Djerf Avenue has more expensive clothing. That makes it easier to cancel Djerf Avenue because you can switch to other products at cheaper prices - Adam

When you think about it, you have a bit of a double standard as a customer. Because on the one hand you feel that that was not good. But then you shop there anyway and I absolutely believe that price aspects may have something to do with it - Maja

This indicates that consumers desire to follow their beliefs of wrong and right which is the aim of cancel culture in holding brands accountable for wrongdoings (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). However, in reality, consumers still value the characteristics of fast fashion involving rapid products of the latest trends at low prices (Bläse et al., 2024), which consequently hurts the environment (Colasante et al., 2023). Therefore, it

appears that the respondents still consider traditional values such as price (Levy, 1959), that contradict personal values when evaluating canceled brands. Hence, a personalized interpretive strategy appears to be applicable as consumers interpret media messages based on personal relevance, integrating them into their own social realities and life situations that shape how they engage with media messages (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1987; Mick & Buhl, 1992). In this case, personal preferences become evident in consumers' consumption choices regarding supporting or rejecting canceled clothing brands.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to form a deeper understanding of Gen Z consumers' perception of cancel culture and how these interpretations influence their behavior in the marketplace within the fashion industry. This was conducted with a focus on the meanings from a sustainability perspective. This study found that the Gen Z consumers define cancel culture in similar ways because they perceive that consumers are withdrawing support from a clothing brand that lacks social or environmental sustainable values. Consequently, consumers criticize these brands on social media, which aligns with Costa & Azevedo (2023), Demsar et al., (2023) and Saldanha et al., (2023) view on cancel culture. The findings further indicated that Gen Z consumers perceive brand criticism to be rapidly spread on social media where its meanings influence consumer behaviour. This illustrates that consumers make sense of cancel culture with use of both social media and with help of other consumers' behaviors to hold clothing brands accountable for lacking sustainable practices.

Moreover, this study reveals that despite similar definitions, Gen Z consumers make sense of cancel culture with divided attitudes on whether cancel culture is positive or negative. Consumers with a positive attitude, see cancel culture as a tool to address changes for clothing brands to become more sustainable as they understand cancellation content on social media to be justified and inspiring. As a result, these consumers do not only see cancel culture as withdrawing support, but also as a symbolic and societal act in promoting sustainability and responsibility in the fashion industry. In contrast, those who interpreted cancel culture as negative emphasize its potential harm. These Gen Z consumers express awareness of risks that arise from the consequences of cancel culture. This shows that they perceive that cancel culture does not always function as a fair system for accountability but rather a mechanism for simplified and distorted reality. In addition, the findings show that these consumers see a desire to nuance the discussion about clothing brands by focusing on driving change toward becoming more sustainable in a neutral way and not solely emphasizing a shameful tone on social media.

In conclusion, the two distinctive groups that either were positive or negative towards the phenomenon of cancel culture did not follow the same interpretation when consumers positioned themselves in the marketplace. In other words, the findings showed having a positive or negative attitude did not matter in their response to a canceled clothing brand. This is because they may

still choose to support or reject it differently depending on the context when adapting cancel culture messages to their own lives. This shift in attitude illustrates how cancelling a brand is a dynamic process as consumers make sense of cancel culture in one way on a conceptual level, but interpret its meaning differently when they integrate it into their own behavior. The reason for this is that consumers use their own background and experiences, particularly in relation to their identity, group belonging and lifestyle when making sense of cancel culture. The findings indicate that consumers are not categorized in only one of Hirschman and Thompson's (1997), interpretive strategies but they rather use a mix of the strategies depending on the context. Therefore it concludes that strategies that Gen Z consumers use to make sense of cancel culture is not a fixed but an evolving process.

### **5.1 Theoretical contributions**

The research on cancel culture has begun, nevertheless, there has been limited research on the phenomena of cancel culture related to consumer behavior using a qualitative research approach. Therefore our research has filled a gap in this research area as this study's focus has been to investigate how Gen Z consumers perceive cancel culture and how its interpretation influences their behavior in the marketplace by conducting in-depth interviews. Previous research has examined what is included in the concept of cancel culture (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Demsar et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). However, this study has contributed to new insights and knowledge in understanding how Gen Z consumers make sense of cancel culture within the fashion industry.

Additionally, earlier research from Hirschman and Thompson (1997), has identified three interpretive strategies that consumers use to form relationships with mass-media including: (1) inspiring and aspiring, (2) deconstructing and rejecting, and (3) identifying and individualizing. This model is applicable to how Gen Z consumers make sense of cancel culture. Moreover, Hirschman and Thompson (1997) imply that consumers use one of the three interpretive strategies. Nonetheless, this study has found that researchers can categorize consumers into several of the interpretive strategies by seeing them as fluid positions that consumers can move between depending on the context. This means that consumers can be categorized into using more than one interpretive strategy according to our findings. Thus, this study contributes to new insights into interpretive strategies that Gen Z consumers use to form relationships with cancel culture messages.

### **5.2 Managerial contributions**

This study contributes to an understanding of how Gen Z consumers make sense of cancel culture and its influences on the fashion industry. Therefore, the findings can be used as guidance for clothing brands to enhance efficient crisis response and communication strategies to adjust their market position and public view after being criticized for lack of sustainable practices. This could also be applied to clothing brands for a preventive purpose to avoid being canceled by

understanding how consumers interpret cancel culture messages and act upon them. In addition, this study gives companies insights into the meaning of consumers' value of social and ecological sustainability in business activities within the fashion industry but also about the consequences when a brand doesn't align with these values.

Lastly, the insights gathered from this study could be used from a managerial perspective to understand how Gen Z consumers perceive, act and make sense of cancel culture. This as consumers often behave in alignment with those around them who share similar lifestyles, values, and identities. Thus, cancel culture becomes dynamic which highlights the importance for clothing brands to stay updated on societal trends and cultural movements in the environment that the company operates in. This is valuable for brand managers and marketers to be able to adapt to changes in consumer behaviors that influence whether clothing brands will succeed in the market.

### **5.3 Study limitation and Future research**

This study's findings are an indication of how Gen Z consumers make sense of cancel culture within the fashion industry. However, the findings do not outline a general conclusion as the sample size is too small, which is a limitation of the study. Thus, further research could replicate the same study using a larger sample size in order to increase generalizability and draw conclusions about consumer behavior regarding consumers' perception of cancel culture within fashion brands. Another suggestion for future research is to conduct the study in other countries with cultural environments different from Sweden by examining consumer behavior in regions such as Asia or South America. Similarly, the study could be applied to analyze other generational groups of Millennials or Generation X. By this, a comparison of other cultures' backgrounds or generations can be made in order to identify differences or similarities in how these different groups make sense of cancel culture.

Moreover, future research could apply a company perspective by examining how clothing brands perceive cancel culture and the business activities focusing on how they adapt their strategies in order to not be cancelled or operate in response when being cancelled. This could give further valuable insight into cancellations. Lastly, as this study focuses on the fashion industry, suggestions for further research could be to apply cancel culture to other industries such as beauty. In the same way, we have limited this study to clothing brands, but further research could examine how cancel culture is perceived when individuals such as influencers or celebrities are being canceled. Consequently, this could provide deeper insight into the phenomenon allowing for a comparison to identify differences when applied to different industries. In addition, this study does not aim to focus on the difference between a canceled fashion brand and a brand that is only being criticized on social media. Hence, future research could explore the differences between being canceled versus criticized.

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