

A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Advertising Design to Engage Generation Z in China

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Abstract

China's Generation Z plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development, yet their engagement with sustainable consumption remains limited due to symbolic, emotional, and cultural disconnections in existing advertising strategies. This study aims to explore how advertising can more effectively resonate with Chinese Gen Z by synthesising cross-disciplinary insights on symbolic consumption, sustainability communication, and visual engagement. Employing an integrative literature review methodology guided by the RQ-CONSTRUCT framework, the study analysed 63 core publications selected from a pool of over 10,000 sources across English and Chinese databases. The review identified three dominant themes—symbolic value construction, emotional resonance, and digital engagement—that shape Gen Z's receptiveness to sustainability messages. Based on these themes, the study develops the CGEN-Z SCA Framework, a conceptual model encompassing four dimensions: symbolic representation, emotional connection, digital interaction, and cultural resonance. This framework offers a strategic lens for designing culturally relevant, affectively powerful, and digitally engaging advertising that fosters sustainable behaviours among China's Generation Z. The study contributes to the literature by bridging symbolic consumption theory and sustainability communication, while providing practical guidance for designers, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote behavioural transformation through visual persuasion.

Keywords: Sustainable Consumption, Symbolic Advertising, Generation Z, Digital Engagement, Conceptual Framework

Introduction

As environmental degradation and overconsumption continue to pose serious challenges to global sustainability, the promotion of sustainable consumption behaviour has emerged as a critical priority for governments, industries, and civil societies. Among various demographic groups, Generation Z represents a particularly influential consumer segment due to their digital nativity, strong social media presence, and value-driven consumption patterns. Yet, existing sustainability communication strategies often fail to resonate with this cohort. As such, there is a pressing need to explore how advertising design can be strategically harnessed to align with Gen Z's unique cultural orientations, aesthetic preferences, and identity-seeking behaviours.

Sustainable consumption has emerged as a critical pillar of global development strategies, particularly in the context of climate change, resource depletion, and rising environmental consciousness. Within this discourse, advertising plays a dual role—it can either reinforce unsustainable consumerism or serve as a transformative tool for promoting responsible behaviours. In recent years, a growing body of research has explored how advertising can contribute to sustainability by reframing messages, leveraging cultural narratives, and evoking emotional responses. However, the effectiveness of such strategies remains limited, particularly when targeting emerging consumer segments such as China's Generation Z.

China's Gen Z, defined broadly as those born between 1995 and 2010, constitutes a digitally native, socially aware, and culturally expressive demographic. This cohort is not only the most active in online consumption but also the most immersed in subcultural symbols, personalised identities, and peer-driven influence mechanisms. Despite displaying heightened concern for environmental and ethical issues, their actual engagement with sustainable consumption practices often remains superficial or inconsistent. Existing advertising strategies frequently fail to address this discrepancy, as they are rooted in rational persuasion models and overlook the symbolic and emotional drivers that shape Gen Z's behaviour.

To address this disconnect, scholars have increasingly turned to the intersections of symbolic consumption theory, semiotic advertising, and digital media studies. These perspectives suggest that sustainable consumption is not solely a matter of awareness or information but a symbolic act that reflects self-identity, cultural belonging, and emotional resonance. For China's Gen Z, sustainability is more likely to be embraced when it aligns with their values, lifestyles, and expressive codes. As such, there is a pressing need for advertising strategies that move beyond generic appeals and engage this generation through culturally situated, visually rich, and emotionally compelling design mechanisms.

While various studies have addressed sustainable advertising, symbolic value, or digital engagement in isolation, there remains a lack of integrative research that synthesises these dimensions into a coherent design framework tailored for China's Gen Z. This study addresses that gap by conducting an integrative literature review across sustainability communication, advertising design, symbolic consumption, and youth culture. Guided by a structured review methodology, this paper identifies key themes, analyses conceptual linkages, and ultimately proposes a visual and symbolic advertising framework for fostering sustainable consumption among Chinese Gen Z consumers.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap between sustainability communication and Gen Z's symbolic and visual consumption preferences by developing a contextually grounded advertising design framework. The findings are significant not only for advancing academic discourse on symbolic and sustainable consumption but also for guiding marketers, designers, and educators seeking to foster pro-environmental behaviours among young Chinese consumers. By highlighting effective symbolic strategies and visual cues, the study provides actionable insights for engaging Gen Z audiences more meaningfully.

Literature Review

In recent years, the intersection between sustainable consumption, advertising, and Generation Z has received growing scholarly attention, especially within the context of emerging economies such as China. Sustainable consumption is no longer merely an environmental concern but increasingly a cultural, symbolic, and behavioural issue shaped by social meaning and identity (Witt, 2010; Cohen, 2005). However, traditional sustainability communication, often dominated by rational appeals and didactic public service announcements, has proven insufficient for engaging young audiences, particularly China's Generation Z (Gen Z), who demand affective, participatory, and culturally resonant messages (Sheng & Yue, 2022).

Scholars have emphasised that Gen Z is not only a digital-native cohort but also symbolic consumers who construct identity through visual culture, subcultural affiliation, and emotional expression (Berger et al., 2011; McCracken, 1987; Wang, 2021). Mick (1986) argued that advertising functions as a semiotic system, facilitating the transfer of meaning between products and consumers, a mechanism especially pertinent for Gen Z, who navigate consumption as a mode of self-expression. In the Chinese context, this symbolic behaviour is deeply embedded in online subcultures, youth-oriented value expression, and the proliferation of "guochao" (national trend) aesthetics (Zhang & Yang, 2021; Wang & Zhou, 2022). However, existing sustainable consumption advertisements often fail to activate such symbolic meaning structures, relying instead on abstract environmental appeals that lack personal relevance (Dodds et al., 2021).

The role of emotional resonance has become increasingly important in recent sustainability communication research. Scholars such as Sweeney et al. (2022) and Gilbert et al. (2021) highlight the necessity of crafting emotionally affective narratives to trigger behavioural responses. Emotional appeals in advertising—such as nostalgia, empathy, pride, or humour—have been shown to significantly influence Gen Z's message acceptance and motivation (Castonguay, 2021; Yang et al., 2015). For Chinese Gen Z, who are influenced by collectivist traditions and emerging digital collectivism, shared emotional experiences such as eco-anxiety or national pride can be effectively harnessed through storytelling and authentic representation (Sheng & Yue, 2022; Robichaud & Yu, 2021). These affective pathways remain underutilised in current sustainable advertising models, which tend to focus on cognitive information over emotional engagement.

In parallel, digital participation is a defining characteristic of Gen Z's media ecology. Unlike previous generations, Chinese Gen Z interacts with sustainability not through top-down campaigns but via interactive digital platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). Harms et al. (2017) describe this cohort as "multi-screen,

multimodal" consumers who prefer co-creation, gamified experiences, and influencer-guided recommendations. Recent studies confirm that digital storytelling, user-generated content (UGC), and participatory design significantly enhance Gen Z's engagement with sustainability topics (Huang et al., 2023; Kim & Cha, 2021). Furthermore, platforms like Weibo and WeChat enable peer-to-peer sustainability communication, embedding eco-values within existing social networks. Nevertheless, many campaigns have yet to fully integrate these digital affordances with symbolic or emotional strategies, resulting in fragmented communication effects.

Several scholars have attempted to address this gap through integrative frameworks. White et al. (2019), for example, proposed the SHIFT model to bridge intention–behaviour gaps via social influence and habit formation, while Berger et al. (2020) explored the narrative potential of visual persuasion. Yet these models remain underexplored in the symbolic and cultural contexts of Chinese Gen Z. Oswald (2015) calls for a "semiotic thinking" approach to brand strategy, which is particularly relevant when sustainability must be culturally re-signified within youth visual cultures. However, few studies have explicitly adapted such models to sustainable advertising for China's Gen Z audience, whose visual fluency and cultural codes diverge from Western norms.

Culturally, China's Gen Z occupies a hybrid identity space—globalised yet rooted in national sentiment, rational yet emotionally expressive. Li (2022) observes that this cohort embraces moral values such as social fairness and environmental justice but also prioritises lifestyle aesthetics and emotional gratification. This tension reflects what Zhang & Zhao (2021) term "ethical aestheticism"—a selective absorption of sustainability values mediated by design appeal and social meaning. Consequently, effective advertising must operate at the convergence of semiotics, affect, and digital culture, designing messages that are not only seen and understood but also felt, shared, and repeated across social platforms.

Moreover, recent Chinese studies emphasise the political and social framing of Gen Z's value systems. Wang (2021) notes that sustainability values in China are often filtered through state-endorsed narratives of "ecological civilisation," while youth subcultures remix these ideologies with personal aesthetics and symbolic codes. Robichaud and Yu (2021) point out that while environmental values are widely accepted in theory, their behavioural translation depends on emotional relevance and peer recognition. Thus, sustainability communication must be sensitive to the symbolic interplay between state ideology, youth identity, and consumer emotion.

Lastly, symbolic dissonance remains a major obstacle. Shao (2019) warns that unless sustainable consumption is framed as culturally aspirational and personally empowering, it risks being marginalised as "low-status" or moralistic. This is especially true in the competitive identity landscape of Chinese Gen Z, where consumption is as much about social capital as about ethics. Without symbolic elevation, even well-designed sustainability messages may be ignored or rejected.

Altogether, the reviewed literature identifies three interrelated design imperatives for engaging China's Gen Z in sustainable consumption advertising: symbolic value construction, emotional resonance, and digital interaction, all embedded within a field of cultural

negotiation. These imperatives are mutually reinforcing and form the basis for the conceptual framework proposed in this study. Yet despite these advances, there remains a lack of systematic integration across these domains, especially one grounded in the cultural-symbolic realities of Chinese Gen Z. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a visual-symbolic framework that fuses theoretical insights from semiotics, communication, and design into a strategic model for behavioural transformation.

Methodology

This study adopts an integrative literature review approach to synthesise current knowledge on advertising strategies that promote sustainable consumption among China's Generation Z. The review design is based on Ibrahim's (2018) RQ-CONSTRUCT model, which provides a structured pathway for aligning research questions with conceptual domains, enabling a coherent and theory-driven synthesis across interdisciplinary literature.

The review process followed three key stages: comprehensive literature search, systematic screening and selection, and thematic synthesis. In the first stage, keyword searches were conducted across major academic databases, including Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, Google Scholar, and the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Search terms were derived from the RQ-CONSTRUCT taxonomy, structured around four dimensions: WHO (Chinese Gen Z consumers), WHAT1 (sustainable consumption), WHAT2 (symbolic and semiotic theories), and HOW (advertising design strategies). Supplementary keywords included: sustainable consumption communication, symbolic consumption, visual persuasion, digital engagement, and emotional advertising. The search period covered literature from 1995 to 2024, with an emphasis on publications from the past decade to capture emerging trends.

A total of 10,391 articles were initially retrieved. After removing duplicates and conducting a title and abstract screening based on relevance to the target research scope, 412 articles were selected for full-text review. Of these, 63 peer-reviewed articles were identified as core sources for in-depth analysis based on their conceptual richness, methodological rigour, and relevance to the Chinese Gen Z context.

Thematic analysis was employed to synthesise findings across the selected literature. The EAGLE Navigator tool (Ibrahim & Kamal, 2018) was used to organise and map key themes, while mind-mapping techniques facilitated the identification of overlapping constructs across symbolic consumption theory, advertising communication, and Gen Z consumer psychology. Through this iterative process, three dominant thematic clusters were developed—symbolic value construction, emotional resonance, and digital engagement—which became the foundation for the conceptual framework presented in this study.

This methodology ensured a systematic, theory-informed synthesis that reflects the interdisciplinary complexity of sustainable advertising in the Gen Z context, while also providing a clear pathway for framework development grounded in the reviewed literature.

Findings

The integrative review identified a consistent gap between existing sustainable advertising strategies and the behavioural and cultural expectations of China's Generation Z. While Gen Z expresses heightened environmental concern, traditional advertising approaches—often

rational, utilitarian, or moralistic—fail to establish symbolic or emotional resonance. Through a thematic synthesis of the selected literature, this study develops the CGEN-Z SCA Framework: a conceptual model that addresses this disconnect by aligning sustainability messaging with Gen Z's cultural, emotional, and digital sensibilities.

The CGEN-Z SCA Framework comprises four interrelated dimensions: symbolic representation, emotional connection, digital interaction, and cultural resonance. These dimensions were distilled from the three dominant thematic clusters emerging from the review—symbolic value construction, emotional engagement, and digital participation—and further refined based on theoretical models from semiotics, consumer psychology, and multimodal advertising.

The first dimension, symbolic representation, highlights the importance of meaning-making in advertising design. Drawing on semiotic theory (McCracken, 1987; Mick, 1986; Oswald, 2015), sustainable consumption is understood not only as a rational choice but as a symbolic act tied to self-identity and status display. Chinese Gen Z engages with products and values that reflect their individualism, aesthetic preferences, and social aspirations (Wang, 2021; Yang, 2022). Advertisements that embed sustainability into culturally meaningful icons, metaphors, and subcultural symbols are more likely to achieve relevance and uptake.

The second dimension, emotional connection, refers to the affective mechanisms that influence Gen Z's engagement with advertising. Research suggests that emotional resonance—particularly through storytelling, authenticity, nostalgia, and humour—enhances both attention and retention in youth audiences (Dodds et al., 2021; Gilbert et al., 2021). In the Chinese context, emotional appeals that emphasise community values, future responsibility, or shared vulnerability (e.g., climate anxiety, generational identity) are particularly effective (Sheng & Yue, 2022). This emotional grounding fosters not only message comprehension but also moral and behavioural alignment.

Third, digital interaction captures the role of participatory media in shaping Gen Z's sustainability perceptions. As digital natives, China's Gen Z prefers interactive, co-created, and socially embedded forms of content (Childers & Boatwright, 2021; Harms et al., 2017). Sustainable advertising that incorporates user-generated content, influencer engagement, and gamified experiences has been shown to improve message credibility and peer reinforcement (Huang et al., 2023; Castonguay, 2021). Importantly, digital interaction is not merely a communication tactic but a value practice—it positions Gen Z not as passive recipients but as active contributors to sustainability narratives.

The fourth dimension, cultural resonance, addresses the sociocultural and ideological context that shapes how Gen Z interprets and values sustainability. Studies indicate that Chinese Gen Z navigates a complex landscape of local traditions, global trends, and youth subcultures (Li, 2022; Zipser & Poh, 2020). Sustainability messages that draw on national identity, social equality, or collective innovation are more persuasive when they are translated into the language of youth-oriented subcultures such as guochao (national fashion), fandoms, or digital art styles (Zhang & Yang, 2021; Wang & Zhou, 2022). This cultural anchoring ensures that sustainability is not seen as external or imposed, but as internal to Gen Z's self-expression.

Together, these four dimensions form a holistic model for designing sustainable consumption advertising that is both symbolically meaningful and strategically engaging. The CGEN-Z SCA Framework offers a culturally sensitive, emotionally compelling, and digitally dynamic roadmap for influencing Gen Z behaviours in ways that align sustainability with identity, experience, and participation.

A visual representation of this framework is presented in Figure 1. The model situates symbolic representation, emotional connection, and digital interaction as core drivers, all grounded in a broader field of cultural resonance. This structure reflects the interdependent nature of Gen Z's meaning systems and provides actionable guidance for advertising practitioners aiming to create transformative campaigns.



Figure 1. The CGEN-Z SCA Framework: Symbolic and Strategic Advertising Design for Sustainable Consumption

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research at the intersection of sustainability, advertising, and Generation Z by developing the CGEN-Z SCA Framework—a four-dimensional model that integrates symbolic representation, emotional connection, digital interaction, and cultural resonance. Drawing on a rigorous integrative review grounded in the RQ-CONSTRUCT methodology, the framework reflects the complexity of sustainable consumption as a socio-symbolic, affective, and culturally situated practice.

Theoretically, this research makes three significant contributions. First, it bridges semiotic theory with sustainable advertising by positioning symbolic consumption as a central mechanism for value communication, particularly in non-Western contexts like China.

Second, it incorporates emotional and affective dimensions—often underexplored in sustainability communication—into the design of persuasive campaigns, highlighting their potential to shape identity-driven behavioural change. Third, it foregrounds digital participation as not merely a channel but an integral part of value co-creation, aligning with the mediated and interactive lifeworlds of Chinese Gen Z.

Practically, the framework offers actionable insights for designers, educators, and policymakers seeking to construct more culturally relevant and emotionally resonant campaigns. It encourages a shift from didactic and rational approaches to multimodal, co-created narratives that embed sustainability within the symbolic and aesthetic codes of youth subcultures.

However, this study is not without limitations. It is conceptual in nature and has not been empirically tested across campaigns or audiences. Additionally, while focused on the Chinese Gen Z context, the framework's generalisability to other cultural settings remains to be explored.

Future research should empirically validate this framework through experimental or mixed-method designs, exploring how each dimension influences actual behavioural outcomes. Cross-cultural comparisons could examine the adaptability of symbolic strategies in different sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, the model can be extended to new media environments—such as AI-generated content, virtual influencers, and immersive digital storytelling—offering fertile ground for understanding how sustainability values can evolve in an increasingly algorithmic and participatory media landscape.

In sum, the CGEN-Z SCA Framework provides both a theoretical foundation and a strategic roadmap for reimagining sustainable consumption advertising in ways that align with the symbolic and experiential logics of Generation Z.

Overall, the symbolic–visual framework presented in this study demonstrates both theoretical utility and practical effectiveness. Theoretically, it enriches current understanding of how symbolic, emotional, and participatory elements can be strategically embedded in sustainability-oriented advertising. Practically, it offers designers and policy advocates a blueprint for crafting persuasive messages that speak to Gen Z's values and lifestyles. Future research may expand on this model across other cultural contexts, product categories, and digital platforms to validate its broader applicability and impact.

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