

Patagonia or Fratagonia? The Impact of Cause Marketing on College-Aged Consumers'  
Purchasing Behavior & Brand Awareness

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**Background -**

Patagonia, Inc., an outdoor accessory and clothing company, focused on providing sustainable, high-quality products and giving back to the environment, and their messaging reflects this. Patagonia's advertising and public relations strategies promote its mission through cause marketing. Cause marketing is a type of corporate social responsibility that aligns a brand with a specific cause to produce benefits for society and profitability. Patagonia uses cause marketing in a variety of ways, including the publicity caused by significant donations to environmental nonprofits, their corporate blog "The Cleanest Line," and their "non-advertisement" advertisements that persuade consumers to purchase less. Cause marketing strategies are increasing in popularity across industries, and although Patagonia did not invent this phenomenon, they are regularly referred to as a company that does it right. The purpose of our research is to get a better understanding of the impact of cause marketing on the purchasing behavior of young adults/college students.

**Methods -**

These results come from the interviews of two UNC-Chapel Hill students. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and consisted of 15 questions relating to cause marketing strategies, overall purchasing habits when buying clothing and knowledge of companies' causes.

The first participant was Nathalie Prophete, a 21-year-old female majoring in Advertising & Public Relations at the Hussman School of Media and Journalism. Nathalie was a great choice as a participant because her current research focuses on Zara and fast fashion. Although her research goes in a different direction from ours, Nathalie's background gave her a notable understanding of the environmental impact of clothing companies, and this understanding prepped her to provide rich answers for questions concerning social causes.

The second participant was Haylie Fehl, a 20-year-old female majoring in Sports & Exercise Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. I chose Haylie to interview for multiple reasons. Firstly, she is from Asheville, NC, which is a city that is considered to be extremely environmentally conscious and has large populations of "hippies." Although she does not identify as a "hippie," Haylie has grown up in an area that takes pride in considering the environmental impact of purchases and has a high population of the key Patagonia consumer. Secondly, Haylie does not own anything from Patagonia. This is a strength because Haylie's answers did not become dependent on what she knows of our client. Thirdly, Haylie also participates in various outdoor activities such as hiking and trail running. These activities are parallel with the prototypical Patagonia consumer. Lastly, Haylie is not an advertising major. Because this is not her area of study, she gives a better look at the opinions of a standard consumer.

The questions for this interview consisted of three general ideas: participants' consciousness of cause marketing and environmental causes, current purchasing behaviors and thought processes, and influential factors/motivations for purchasing from particular companies. The questions are not in an extremely structured order, but the beginning questions are more general and revolve around the general consciousness of cause marketing and environmental issues.

**Results -**

The responses to these interviews vary a decent amount, but ultimately paint the picture of college students who are at some level aware of the implications of their purchases and want to do better.

Nathalie indicated that she is someone who is hugely brand conscious but is limited in purchasing from brands due to cost and quality. Nathalie noted price and quality as the most significant considerations for whether or not to buy certain products. If the quality supports the price, she will consider the product, but if the perceived quality is not notable, it is not worth a hefty price tag. Her

outlook has changed on valuing environmental impact as she has become more educated on the subject. Due to the increased pressure on sustainability and climate change since the beginning of the Trump administration, she considers herself more aware of the issue and puts more thought into her day-to-day consumption and habits.

“The more you go up in education ranking, people care more about it,” responded Nathalie when asked about whether her age group was more inclined to purchase sustainably marketed products. This comment raises an interesting point about the relationship between class and purchasing habits. This relates to the remarks made in our focus groups about how Patagonia is for strictly “well-off” customers due to its price. This factor of education adds some validity to our approach of analyzing Patagonia in the eyes of college students. It will make this research even more critical than if they were to research non-educated young adults and provides insights on a factor we have previously ignored.

Haylie indicated that she does consider the transparency of brands and the societal implications of her purchases. These values usually apply when purchasing food and cosmetics because these items are consumed or put on the skin. An interesting point made by Haylie was that she had a difficult time answering the questions because she generally purchases so little. When she does, it is often second-hand to avoid the manufacturing of an unnecessary item. These comments are extremely fitting for Patagonia’s messaging and the Worn Wear program but do not help the company gather more customers. Furthermore, pricing is also an essential factor, but she is willing to gauge the benefit of purchase with the price difference and societal implications.

“I feel like companies could do a better job of promoting these things. Maybe I am not in the loop, but I’d like to see more concrete evidence of what they’re doing. Prove that you’re doing something. I hate when companies just take a stance. Opinions are different from actions. Companies can be more aggressive in how they promote what they’re doing in the world,” said Haylie as a concluding comment on the interview. This is an interesting point because it shows a lack of awareness that regular consumers can have even if they do care about social causes such as sustainability.

Both participants identified that they are passive learners of companies’ cause marketing efforts. Both find out information about companies’ causes through social media activity, and if interested at this point, they will look on corporate websites for more information. Because of this, we see a need to put information more explicitly in front of consumers before they’re going to gather more information and decide to purchase or not.

### **Analysis/Discussion -**

As a whole, I think that the interview process went exceptionally well with each participant. If I could go back and change anything, I would have established a more defined order for the questions. I would not have changed any of the questions because they addressed precisely what is necessary for the greater research and provided valuable data. Although the answers were strong, I would like to have seen where a more structured question order would have taken the interviews and whether this would have affected the responses or level of detail.

The same ideas are present as in the previous research. Ultimately, young adult consumers care about companies’ causes, but awareness about these issues varies depending on education on the cause and exposure to the issue and the brand. Our survey will be an excellent opportunity to focus on the access of information that young adults have for learning about social/environmental causes and a quantitative look at how often participants actively seek out this information. Once we get a more focused understanding of how consumers get this information, we can leverage this to improve Patagonia’s communications efforts.