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## CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS BRANDS IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABILITY

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### Abstract

This paper investigates consumer attitudes toward brand sustainability with a specific focus on the values and purchasing behaviors of Generation Z. With sustainability emerging as a key factor influencing consumer choices, the study seeks to explore the intersection between brand commitment to environmental and social responsibility and consumer expectations. The purpose of this research is to understand how sustainability shapes consumer preferences and informs marketing strategies, particularly for eco-conscious brands.

Methodologically, the study employs secondary research to analyze existing data on brand sustainability perceptions, purchasing attitudes, and ethical consumerism. It further investigates the generational shift in sustainability priorities and its implications for brand communication and positioning. This approach provides insights into the alignment between consumer values and brand strategies in the context of growing environmental awareness and sustainability demands.

**Keywords:** brand, gen Z, marketing communication, purchasing decisions, sustainability

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## Introduction

According to the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, people trust business more than government. As many as 48 percent of people find businesses a more trustworthy source of information than government (46 percent) or the media (42 percent), with only non-profit organisations having a higher trustworthiness than the business sector. Moreover, 63 percent of consumers report purchasing brands that align with their values and beliefs. This is supported by data from research agency NMS Research, which shows that 66 percent of people say they support a brand choosing to engage in activities that have a positive impact on society alongside their business. Generation Z, in particular, is very critical of brands in this regard and tracks their activity in supporting or not supporting various organisations or events. At the same time, this is the generation that declares their positive attitude towards sustainability the most, but is questionable when it comes to their purchasing decisions.

As the climate crisis continues to impact our lives, awareness of the need to act sustainably is growing among consumers of all ages, albeit at different rates. Brands and retailers who respond to consumer demand to think and act more sustainably will be better placed to succeed in an increasingly uncertain future.

“One of the objectives of marketing strategy is to improve the value of a company through brand image (Chang, 2012; Gao et al., 2016), and in the context of the sustainable environment, marketing strategy aimed at collaborating the issue surrounding environmentally friendly product (Ellison et al., 2016; Gupta & Kumar, 2013) and to gain a competitive advantage (Ellison et al., 2016). Green brand image is proven to give impact on consumer purchase intention (Chang, 2012) as it explains consumer judgment and perception on product image (Ramirez, 2013). Green brand image is formed based on consumers’ mind through a series of perception (Mourad et al., 2012). In other words, green brand image is being interpreted by the consumer not only due to the company’s social activities but through product offer (Kull & Heath, 2016)”. (Alamsyah et al., 2020, 1963)

For the purpose of sustainable development, recent studies have delved into the significance of a green brand image. Research investigating the

dynamics of consumers' perceptions of benefits associated with green brands reveals that product attributes addressing functional, social expression, and outward-directed self-esteem needs play a pivotal role in enhancing the green brand image. Notably, functional benefits exert a more substantial influence on consumers' beliefs in a brand's environmental consciousness and commitment fulfillment compared to emotional benefits. The connection between ecological innovations and the green brand is direct. Harini et al.'s findings propose that ecological innovation, facilitated through intervening variables in ecological marketing, can significantly amplify the performance of green marketing and green brands (Loučanová et al., 2021).

When we talk about sustainable brands, we can define them as brands whose main mission is precisely their response to social challenges, climate change (and the other attributes we define above in the section on sustainability) in the form of their behaviour or the design of their products or services. However, from our point of view, in this context we cannot leave out the term 'brand purpose', which we translate as the mission or purpose of a brand. Although some marketers question this notion, others give it great importance in branding. Even communication scholar Julia Frohne distinguishes between the two concepts of 'purpose' and 'brand purpose' with regard to stakeholder groups: 'The distinction of stakeholder orientation offers a starting point for distinguishing between the two concepts. While "Purpose" as a comprehensive concept encompasses all stakeholders of a company, i.e. customers, employees, suppliers, local communities and shareholders, "Brand Purpose" focuses on shaping the relationship between the brand and the consumer'. From a sustainability perspective, we can also talk about a certain brand mission in ESG (which we have defined above). At the same time, it is also a concrete differentiator against competing brands, notwithstanding the fact that today Generation Z is coming to the fore, for whom, according to the available data, sustainability represents one of the basic concepts in brand choice or overall purchasing decisions (although here too we can see limits, see the article Sustainability as a new trend in brand communication and its perception by Generation Z in this proceedings) (Galera Matúšová and Načiniaková, 2023).

## Purchasing attitudes of consumers toward sustainability

On the one hand, we are talking about sustainable brands that are trying to find their mission in the market they are entering or already operating in, precisely in the theme of sustainability. On the other hand, we also need to look at consumer purchasing behaviour. The existence of a brand on the market depends on them. In this context, we can talk about ethical consumerism. According to Kaufmann et al. (2012) the fundamental difference between traditional and environmental purchasing behaviour is that in traditional purchasing behaviour the consumer perceives the benefits of the purchased goods immediately, whereas in environmentally conscious behaviour the outcome and value of the purchase is oriented towards the future (e.g. a cleaner environment). Khan et al. (2020) further state in their study that people who actively engage in environmentally conscious consumer behaviour generally come from three key segments:

- a) consumers who grew up in periods in which they registered specific critical environmental issues and their impact on the environment was immediate and relevant,
- b) highly educated consumers who are more likely to be aware of the environmental impact of their unsustainable consumer behaviour,
- c) higher income groups who are able to bear the higher prices of sustainable green products.

“Increasing climate change and environmental problems have led many consumers to express concerns about environmental sustainability. A recent consumer research report indicated that around 60 percent of consumers are willing to change their consumption habits to mitigate the environmental impact. (e.g. offering clean products, demonstrating environmental responsibility and promoting recycling). Sustainability has thus become an incentive for consumer purchasing decisions.” (Tae Rang Choi & Ahn, 2023, p. 90)

Strong commitment to sustainability in their purchasing decisions is exhibited by Generation Z. This eco-conscious generation values environmental responsibility and expects brands to take a lead in addressing environmental issues. Respondents across all generations expect retailers and brands to become more sustainable. The study of The Baker Retailing Center at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania (2021)

shows that three-quarters of Generation Z consumers state that sustainability is more important to them than brand when making purchase decisions. 75 percent of Generation Z survey participants prefer sustainability over brand name of product, and 71 percent of Millennials, 73 percent of Generation X and 65 percent of Baby Boomers agree. This study also shows that Generation Z is influencing the older generations to place more importance on sustainability in their purchasing decisions and that older generations including Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials are disconnected with Generation Z on what sustainability actually means. The majority of Baby Boomers (44 percent), Generation X (48 percent), and Millennials (46 percent) believe that sustainability means products made from recycled, sustainable, and natural harvested fibers and materials but Generation Z (48 percent) believes that sustainability is more about sustainable manufacturing (Jezerc, 2021).

Sustainable consumption behavior, alternatively referred to as pro-environment or green behavior, is characterized by actions that contribute to environmental sustainability without causing harm, and in some cases, may even provide environmental benefits. These behaviors encompass various activities, including the purchase of eco-friendly products, efficient energy use, conservation of natural resources, responsible waste sorting of water and garbage, and the reduction of food and solid waste.

“Unlike previous generations (who successively postponed this concern because they were focused on economic growth), today’s young people, born after 1994, christened Generation Z (Gen Z) seem more aware and concerned about the depletion of natural resources, often claiming that there is no planet B. Gen Zer’s attitudes, believes and behaviours have been shaped by issues such as globalization, terrorism, the 2008 financial crises, technology and the Covid-19 pandemic. Understanding this generation is paramount since, in 2020, it has become dominant in the world, representing 32 percent of the world’s population, greatly surpassing the Millennium or Baby Boomer generation. Furthermore, by 2030, this generation will be the central workforce in society and will play a major role in creating a sustainable future and achieving SDGs. Thus, Gen Z is an indispensable and strategic component of building a sustainable future” (Yamane and Kaneko, 2021, according to Pinho and Gomes, 2023, p. 2)

Compared to prior generations, Gen-Z consumers possess greater awareness and concern for environmental and social issues and display a stronger propensity to engage in sustainable consumption practices. As Gen-Z consumers currently constitute approximately 40 percent of global consumers and are projected to become the largest consumer segment worldwide by 2030, their burgeoning spending power has become increasingly evident (Zhang et al., 2023).

“Gen Z is also generally known for its ‘idealism’ —they’re part of a new wave of inclusive consumers and socially progressive dreamers. Generally speaking, Gen Zers believe in doing their part to help stop the intensification of climate change and to establish greater equity for all. More than any other generation, Gen Z collectively demands purpose and accountability, the creation of more opportunities for people of diverse and underrepresented backgrounds, and rigorous sustainable and green practices”. (McKinsey & Company, 2023, para 4)

A special report was realized by Edelman in June 2022 on 13,700+ respondents in 14 countries. According this report Gen Z wants to work with brands to have shared action, not moments (a clever ad) but movements toward demonstrable change. Nearly two-thirds of those 14-17 and 62 percent of those 18-26 say that they want to collaborate with brands on addressing issues, including racism, climate change and gender inequality. A stunning 84 percent of young Gen Zers (14-17) say that they buy on beliefs, with a five-point jump in the past year among those 18-26 years old to 64 percent saying they’re activist via brand choice. By nearly a 2-to-1 margin, respondents want more ‘We than Me’—they prefer to have brands make the world a better place over brands making them a better person. Gen Z has a broad remit for brands. Previous Edelman brand study from 2017 found that brands were expected to take a stand on behalf of consumers (50 percent) (Edelman, 2022).

Today, the brand must take a stand on issues that affect its employees (60 percent), its customers (59 percent) and how the products are made (55 percent). As of May 2022, the brand’s stand must be reflected in what they do (63 percent, on average across items) including fair treatment of employees, where they do business, and their supply chain. The brand’s communications must also demonstrate their stand via advertising and

on their website (62 percent, on average across items). The new responsibility is geopolitics, with 41 percent of consumers telling us that they have bought, or boycotted brands based on their response to the Russian invasion. There is a tangible payoff for brands that heed the call for action. When brands take a stand on human rights, climate, gender equity or racial justice, there is a 4-to-1 higher likelihood of purchase. Over half of adult Gen Z respondents say they're willing to pay a premium for brands that earn their trust and improve the world, more than their willingness to pay a premium for brands based on their image. Trusted brands get much higher loyalty and advocacy (67 percent) in the face of competition (Edelman, 2022).

“Recent World Retail Congress report found a ‘clear disconnect’ between retailers’ sustainability ambitions and their measurable progress. Of 37 retail businesses, more than 50 percent had not set any sustainability KPIs, despite 60 percent believing that their company goals were ‘bold and differentiated’. Gen-Z are demanding substance behind retailers’ sustainability goals – alignment with values alone is not enough. To be sustainable in the eyes of Gen-Z consumers requires tangible, authentic, demonstrable environmental action. Sustainability as a major priority shall not be only a response to a consumer trend, it should be a key element of wider business strategy.” (Judkins, n.d.)

So, in order to become the brand of choice for Gen Z, companies need to not only communicate, but also act, with ethical standards. Like environmental impact, social impact should be measured within all aspects of the business; ensuring ethical business practices every step of the way, from corporate policy to third-party vendors.

Having experienced a turbulent economic climate through upbringing, this has built a strong sense of frugality within Generation Z. Authors Djafarova and Foots (2022) conducted a qualitative method in the form of 18 semi-structured interviews on participants aged within the Generation Z cohort in the United Kingdom. This study explores the factors that encourage Generation Z consumers to turn an ethical purchase intention into purchase behaviour. When they asked what participants perceive to be the biggest limitation to them purchasing ethically more frequently all of them mentioned cost. Price is therefore the main perceived barrier for

Generation Z with ethical purchase habits. Literature indicated that this is not just a singular price factor that limits ethical consumption. The essential factor in ethical consumption is the elevated relative price. Consumers find themselves being obligated to travel further distances to retrieve ethical product selections. They are not only be hit with higher product prices, but extra costs incurred with traveling. Further to this, negative environmental impact from extra traveling feels counterproductive to consumers (Barbarossa and Pastore, 2015). Hence, consumers are inclined toward convenient product purchases while maintaining a heightened awareness of recycling and minimizing waste consumption. When discussing perceived behavioural control participants were also asked about purchase enablers with ethical products. Thirteen respondents (out of 18) agreed that social media influencers are a great tool when purchasing ethically (Djafarova and Foots, 2022).

## Conclusion

A green brand image is crucial for sustainable development, as it impacts consumer purchase intention and perceptions of product image Generation Z, who declares a positive attitude towards sustainability the most, is particularly critical of brands and their purchasing decisions. Research has shown that Generation Z demonstrates heightened pro-environmental attitudes and a greater interest in the condition of the natural environment compared to preceding generations. They actively express concern for environmental degradation and declare a heightened awareness of the environmental state. This generation's strong commitment to sustainability is reshaping consumer behavior and influencing older generations to prioritize sustainability in their purchasing decisions as well. This study underscores the critical role of incorporating sustainability into branding and marketing strategies. Businesses should focus on authenticity and measurable outcomes to align with consumer expectations, particularly those of Gen Z, who demand tangible environmental actions rather than symbolic gestures. Additionally, brands must navigate the challenges of educating consumers about their sustainability efforts while ensuring affordability, especially for younger generations. However, we see limits in the declared and actual purchasing behaviour of Generation Z in relation to sustainability. The economic situation of this generation, which is just



entering the labour market, often does not allow them to behave sustainably in some areas and to be more inclined towards, for example, fast fashion, which we also see as an opportunity for further research.

Future studies could also explore the long-term impact of sustainability communication on brand loyalty across different consumer segments and regions. Comparative analyses between generational cohorts can provide a deeper understanding of the evolving attitudes toward sustainability.

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## STAVOVI POTROŠAČA PREMA BRENDovima U KONTEKSTU ODRŽIVOSTI

### Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje stavove potrošača prema održivosti brendova, s posebnim naglaskom na vrijednosti i kupovne navike generacije Z. S obzirom na to da održivost postaje ključan faktor koji utječe na potrošačke odluke, cilj istraživanja je ispitati povezanost između predanosti brendova ekološkoj i društvenoj odgovornosti i očekivanja potrošača. Svrha ovog istraživanja je razumjeti na koji način održivost oblikuje potrošačke preferencije i kako informira marketinške strategije, osobito u slučaju ekološki osviještenih brendova.

Metodološki, istraživanje se oslanja na sekundarnu analizu podataka, proučavajući postojeće informacije o percepciji održivosti brendova, kupovnim stavovima i etičkoj potrošnji. Također istražuje generacijske promjene u prioritetima vezanim uz održivost i njihov utjecaj na komunikaciju i pozicioniranje brendova. Ovakav pristup pruža uvid u usklađenost potrošačkih vrijednosti i strategija brendova u kontekstu sve veće ekološke svijesti i zahtjeva za održivim poslovanjem.

**Ključne riječi:** brend, generacija Z, marketinška komunikacija, kupovne odluke, održivost