

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENERATIONS: THE SUSTAINABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENERATION Z

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Abstract

Our society's growth and evolution now place a strong emphasis on sustainability. Sustainable practices ensure a brighter future for future generations in a world with finite resources and adverse environmental effects. Of course, everyone's participation is necessary if there is any prospect for a better world. However, with time, studies have revealed that youngsters are more engaged in neighborhood activities, social responsibility initiatives, and sustainable practices.

Starting from these considerations, the article aims to outline a profile of Generation Z, taking into account their constant concern for protecting the environment. Thus, we analyze their attitude towards recycling, their behavior distinct from previous generations, and the factors contributing to shaping this behavior.

From a methodological perspective, for this research, we conducted a quantitative survey-based study among members of Generation Z.

Following the statistical analysis, the results confirmed our hypothesis that young people exhibit proactive behavior, demonstrating a willingness to engage in the life of their community and participate in actions aimed at conserving the environment. Likewise, through this research, we were able to identify the materials most frequently recycled by young people, as well as the significance of the location for recycling.

Keywords: *Generation Z, sustainable behaviour, recycling behaviour, generational theory*

Clasificare JEL: *Q01, Q56, M31*

1. Introduction and context of the study

According to [31], sustainability is the capacity to satisfy present demands without compromising the likelihood that future generations will be able to satisfy their requirements.

Putting sustainable principles into practice is done easily through education [7]. In recent decades, several non-governmental organizations, governments, and educational institutions have developed programs and awareness campaigns on the importance of [21]. These efforts have helped raise awareness of environmental issues and promote more sustainable behavior among citizens.

Numerous studies carried out over time [20]; [16]; [9] show us that young people are more involved in protecting the environment and more willing to get involved in actions based on sustainable principles. Therefore, we can consider that sustainable principles are "learned", being more easily assimilated by people who belong to Generation Z.

However, we do not know exactly the aspects that underlie the formation of sustainable behaviour. In this context, the major objective of this scientific endeavor is to outline a generational

profile for young people belonging to Generation Z and to identify the factors underlying the formation of sustainable behavior.

The research novelty of this scientific approach is represented by the identification and deepening of some factors that contribute to the formation of sustainable behaviour. Also, the novelty of the research is represented by the analysis of the importance given to recycling by young people, with a focus on the materials recycled and the locations where these actions can take place.

The research gap is represented by insufficient knowledge of the particularities of Generation Z in terms of a proactive attitude towards the environment and sustainable behaviour.

2. The importance of sustainability in young people's life

2.1. Defining sustainability

An important aspect of youth involvement in sustainability is their participation in concrete actions to protect the environment. According to researchers [17]; [18] young people can significantly contribute to environmental conservation efforts through volunteering, selective waste collection, tree planting, and the promotion of renewable energy. These activities not only have a positive impact on the environment but also develop a sense of responsibility and awareness among them.

Recent studies highlight the role of younger generations (Generation Z and Generation Y) in promoting sustainability through the adoption of specific consumption behaviors and the use of technologies in their daily activities. For these generations, technology and the application of sustainable principles become particularly evident during online shopping, with greater emphasis placed on the ecological impact of their actions [5]; [24]. Essentially, this reflects a paradigm and value shift compared to previous generations.

Another option for young people to help with the implementation of sustainable initiatives is through responsible consumption [23]. Research by [28] found that altering consumption patterns can significantly reduce the ecological footprint. Young people have the potential to choose environmentally friendly products, or "green products" [9] as well as to use less energy.

Their educational experiences greatly influence young people's ability to recycle [13]. According to a 2011 study [22], implementing recycling programs in schools can significantly raise community recycling rates. Young people can organize awareness campaigns, participate in selective waste collection, and teach their peers the value of recycling. According to some studies [19], young people can influence the recycling behavior of parents and adults around them. They can promote adopting recycling practices and environmental responsibility within homes and communities.

Members of Generation Z often bring innovative ideas to recycling and waste management. According to a study [25], young people can develop creative projects and initiatives such as using waste for art and design or developing apps for efficient waste management. These innovative methods can add value to the recycling process.

Beyond the ecological dimension, sustainability also generates effects in the social and cultural spheres. Social media plays a significant role in shaping and modeling the sustainable behavior of Generation Z. Technology and social media thus facilitate the promotion of sustainability, encouraging young people to engage in concrete actions, such as purchasing eco-friendly products [8].

2.2. Generation Z - characteristics

Generation Z, also known as Generation Z or Baby Boomers, represents a group of young people born between the mid-1990s and early 2010 [32]. This generation has specific characteristics due to the technological, socioeconomic, and cultural context in which it grew up, and is often seen as the most promising in terms of adopting sustainable behaviors and values. Because they were raised in a world where environmental hardship and climate change were

prevalent, this generation has particularly sustainable traits. Generation Z is the first generation to learn how to use the Internet, cell phones, and social media from a young age since they were raised in a world that was dominated by technology [15].

According to [3] research, 95% of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 own a mobile phone. Early exposure to technology has changed how Gen Z interacts with others, communicates, and learns.

Gen Z is known for having a greater interest in inclusivity and diversity [29]. Politics and environmental activism are well-known characteristics of Generation Z. Young people in this group are more likely to participate in protests, environmental initiatives, and political discussions about climate change.

Gen Z is leveraging technology to create sustainable solutions. Young people in this group are known to have the ability to use technology to find solutions to environmental problems [9]; [30]; [1]). They help raise funds and promote sustainable causes through mobile apps, crowdfunding platforms, and social media. Social media influencers have the power to shape the decisions of Generation Z members and influence their preferences [11]; [14] often representing an ideal that young people aspire to achieve.

Similarly, the level of social awareness and concern for sustainability is higher among Generation Z members. Through their purchases, they support companies that promote ethical consumption or responsible practices, thereby contributing to the creation of a sustainable brand [6]. The reference group to which young people belong plays an important role in shaping their attitudes towards these companies, with the opinions of the group and the projected social image (social self) being significant factors for Generation Z members [10]; [26].

Driven by a desire to protect the environment, young people in this generation are more likely to pay a premium for eco-friendly or green products [9]; [27]. This tendency is evident in both products and services, with Generation Z viewing this approach as a way to support their community and the companies that implement sustainable principles in their activities.

3. Methodology

To carry out this work, we carried out a quantitative research among the members of Generation Z, aged between 18 and 25 years. The sample was made up of approximately 570 young people from Transylvania. The research carried out was based on a questionnaire made up of 14 items regarding recycling habits regarding plastic packaging or aluminum cans.

The sampling method chosen was convenience sampling, with an online survey.

The basis of the construction of the questionnaire was the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) so the items targeted aspects related to attitudes and behavioral intentions, as well as elements related to the social self and the personality of individuals.

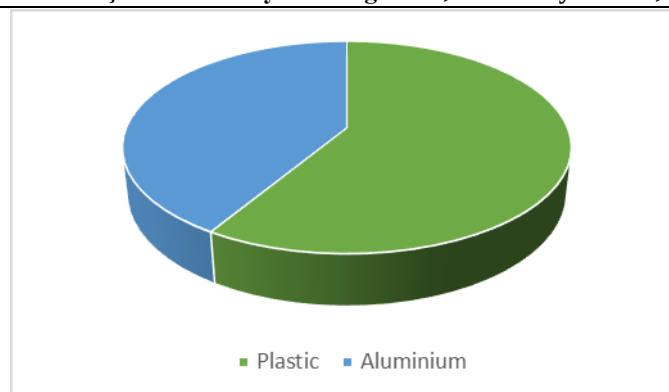
The final part of the questionnaire consisted of identification questions: gender, background, education level, and disposable income.

The research took place in the first part of 2024 and sought to collect information on Generation Z's sustainable behavior.

4. Results

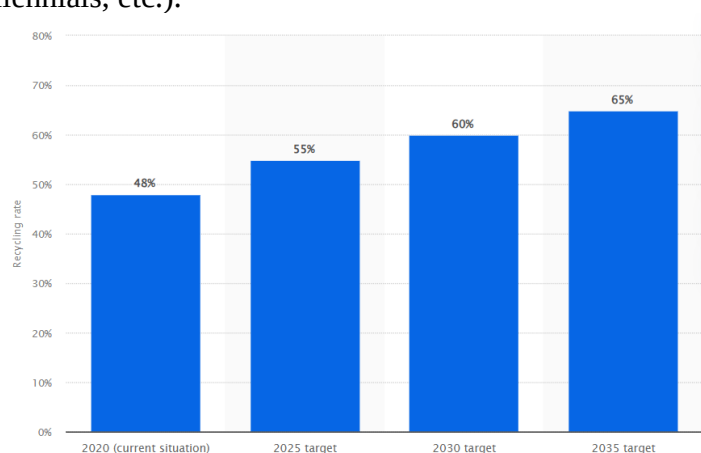
Analyzing the distribution of the sample, we can see that most of the respondents are women (approx. 75%), coming from the urban environment, with an income between 1.001 – 2.000 RON.

Regarding recycling behavior, approximately 500 of the respondents mentioned that they recycle plastic packaging (Figure No. 1). Considering that most products are found in this packaging, and aluminum ones are less used, the large number of respondents who opt for the recycling process is justified.

Figure 1. *What do consumers recycle?*

Source: author's calculations

Although the number of people from Generation Z who recycle is quite high, it is important to remember that, at the level of our country, the population is also made up of other cohorts of individuals (Gen X, Millennials, etc.).

Figure 2: *Recycling targets – European Union*

Source: [2]

Figure no. 2 reflects the municipal waste recycling targets in the European Union, projecting for the period 2020 – 2035. The results obtained show a significant increase in the recycling rate.

If we analyze the place where young people recycle most frequently, it can be seen that most do this action at home (figure no. 3), with the next option being retail stores. The small number of respondents who chose the "job" option is also due to the lack of a job, young people still attending university courses.

Figure 3: *Where do consumers recycle?*

Source: author's calculations

In the research we carried out, most respondents mentioned that environmental problems are a concern for them (Figure no. 4), aiming to identify new ways to solve them. Thus, the research we carried out shows us that members of Generation Z tend to prioritize environmental issues, placing them in the first place.

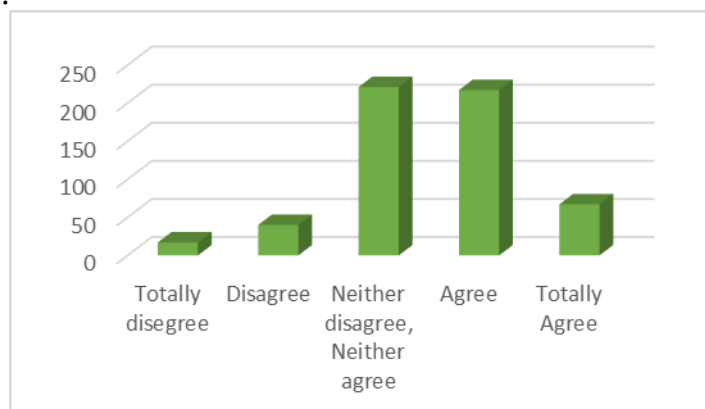


Figure 4: *Environmental issues are a big concern for me*

Source: author's calculations

Most respondents mentioned that, out of a desire to protect the environment, they buy a reusable bag at the time of purchase, if they did not bring one from home (figure no. 5).

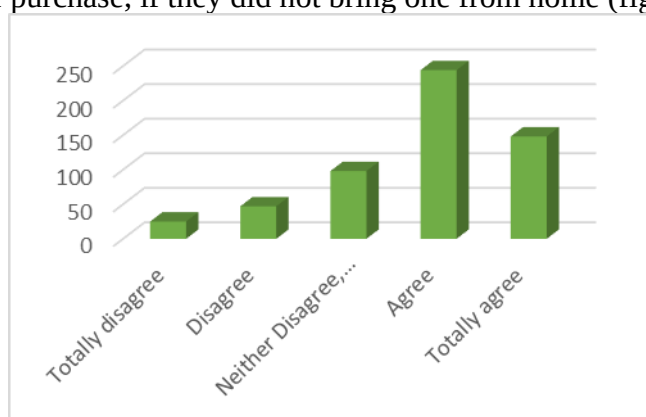


Figure 5: *If I forget the bag at home when I go shopping, I buy a new reusable bag*

Source: author's calculations

Analyzing the behavior regarding the purchase of drinks in plastic packaging, many respondents mention that they prefer this type of packaging due to its ease of use and recycling. Thus, young people are not fans of drinks packaged in plastic or glass.

Another solution that members of Generation Z have found is to reuse the same water bottle. Thus, they reduced the number of packages purchased (Figure No. 6). Also, most of the respondents mentioned that they do not buy hot drinks in disposable cups.

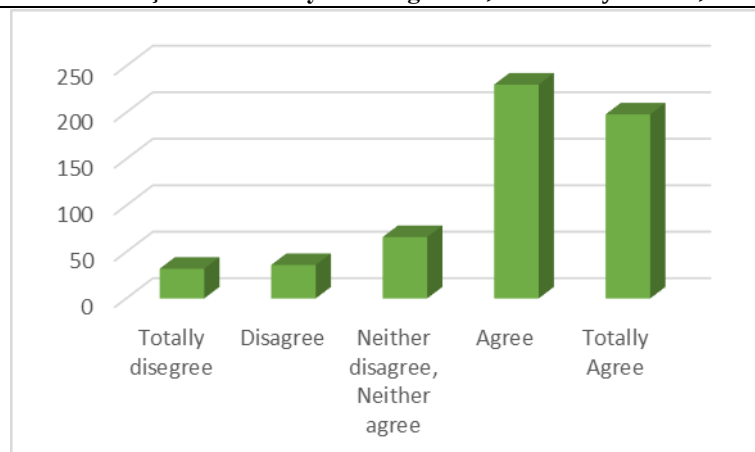


Figure 6: *I wash and refill the same water bottle multiple times*

Source: author's calculations

Although the desire of Generation Z to adopt sustainable behavior is expressed more frequently, some studies [6]; [12] demonstrate that this aspect is also found in previous generations. Thus, research shows that there is a significant relationship between age and green purchase behavior, older people buy eco-friendlier products. At the same time, some studies show that people from generations X and Y buy more green products, a possible explanation being related to their cost [6]. With a higher price, it is more plausible that these generations will afford the purchase. On the contrary, even if Generation Z is a follower of sustainable behavior, it does not have enough resources to buy these products.

Also, [6] show that people from generations X and Y have a greater tendency to buy products from socially responsible companies. Even if they are not so involved in CSR campaigns, they prefer to purchase these products.

5. Conclusions

Sustainability is an essential aspect of young people's lives and our collective future. Education, concrete action, and involvement in politics and business are all ways young people can make a positive difference in the fight against climate change and protect the environment [4]. Through their active engagement and responsible action, young people can help build a better and more sustainable future for all.

Generation Z is significantly influenced by technology and the socio-economic context in which they grew up. Characteristics of this generation, such as openness to diversity, entrepreneurial spirit, and concern for social issues, have an impact on society as a whole [9]. As Generation Z adapts and contributes to the ongoing changes, it is important to understand these particularities to better meet the needs and expectations of the young people in this cohort.

To distinguish it from previous generations, Gen Z has a proactive behavior, getting involved not only in protecting the environment but also in actions that contribute to reducing pollution and lessening the effects of climate change.

Reducing the amount of plastic they use, buying "green products", and volunteering for waste collection are just some of the actions they initiate and the campaign for a clean medium.

Regarding the limitations of the research, these are directed in two ways. First, the research only considers members of Generation Z from Transylvania, excluding other regions of the country. Given the level of education and the unequal distribution of financial resources, there is a possibility of identifying differences within the same generation based on the region of origin.

The second limitation arises from the nature of the research. This study is based on quantitative research, which provides a static picture of consumer behavior, without considering future intentions regarding sustainable behavior or the factors that have shaped it.

Therefore, in the future, we aim to expand the research to a national level, including other regions of Romania, and to conduct, in parallel, qualitative research (semi-structured interviews) that will facilitate a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and the motivations that underlie the formation of this behavior.

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