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Generational Perspectives on Sustainable Consumption:
Exploring Consumer Behaviour
of Millennials and Generation Z

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Abstract

Consumerism has become a worldwide problem, impacting not only the economy but also the way we live. One of the major problems resulting from consumerism is global pollution, which obviously affects the environment and has serious consequences, including on people's health. It is essential to take sustainable measures and encourage waste reduction and the choice of eco-friendly products. The main objective of our research paper regarding the generational perspectives on sustainable consumption is to explore the consumer behaviour of two generational cohorts, Millennials and Generation Z, and to provide a general understanding of their attitudes, motivations, and behaviours in relation to environmental sustainability. First, we collected information from the specialised literature about the researched subject, after which we carried out quantitative research using the survey method. The results of the research helped us identify the impediments and challenges faced by Millennials and Generation Z in adopting sustainable practices related to consumption, as well as the factors that encourage them to engage in sustainable consumption. In the last part of our research, we presented some recommendations aimed at improving the culture of sustainable consumption within the Millennials and Generation Z cohorts. This paper contributes to the field by providing essential details about these two generations perspectives regarding sustainable consumption so that, especially companies, can tailor their products and marketing strategies to align with the values and preferences of Millennials and Generation Z, fostering a more sustainable future.

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JEL Classification: Q50, E20, M30.

1. Introduction

It is essential that current and future generations are informed about contemporary topics such as sustainable consumption so that we can live in a healthy and sustainable environment, in which even the economy has a healthy way of growing without harming the environment.

Once consumers meet with a very large supply of goods, their desire to consume and own as many of them as possible appears. This desire turns into an action of mass consumption, a term known as consumerism. This consumption, usually has an expiration date, because of factors such as: the expiration date of the products, and new trends that appear and make us get rid of the old things to make room for the new ones to intervene. Well, all of this turns into waste, each of which contributes to global pollution, having a negative impact on people's health, the environment, and a safe future for future generations. Due to these aspects, this topic has become one of interest for the researcher but also for companies, NGOs, and government institutions as it has become crucial to live and develop in a healthy environment.

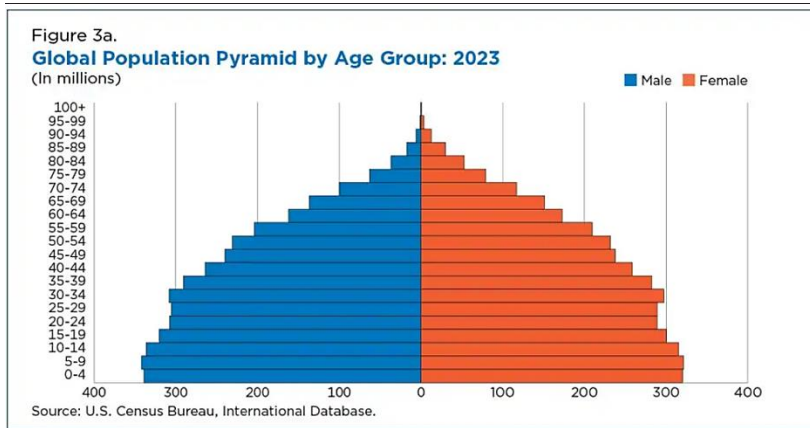
In a world where achieving economic growth is crucial for all nations to maintain their place as superpowers, consumerism has expanded to encompass social and environmental aspects.

From a certain point of view, it is considered that consumerism is a good thing that promotes economic expansion, according to a Keynesian belief that consumer spending is the main generator of the economy and that encouraging people to spend is a governmental objective (Hayes, 2024). Although this phenomenon is beneficial from a strategic and political point of view for economic growth, it also brings a series of negative elements that affect the environment, the way we live, and even our health. Thus, sustainable consumption and production concerns have become a topic of international interest to stop the negative effects of consumerism. In 1992, as a result of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation was created (United Nations, n.d.). All countries were called in 2002 to promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, where industrialised and developed nations led the way (Wang et al., 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Considering the fact that Millennials are born between 1981 and 1996 and their current ages must be 28-43 years old and people from Generation Z are born in the interval between 1997 and 2012 and must be 12-27, Figure 1 shows that, according to 2023 data, there are more people from Generation Z than Millennials, and we observe a relatively larger distribution of men.

Figure 1. Global Population Pyramid by Age Group:2023



Source: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/11/world-population-estimated-eight-billion.html>.

Millennials together with Generation Z make up most of the consumer population today. Lee and Kotler (2016) characterises millennials as people born between 1989 and 2000. They are the most business activity-aware generation as they were the most affected by the digital revolution (Stewart et al., 2017). They are also the most ethical generation and show greater resistance to unethical practices in the workplace (Payton, 2015). Generation Z has been called the “first true digital native generation” (Lanier, 2017).

2.1 Sustainable Consumption Patterns among Millennials and Generation Z

Millennials are a generation of young people. Recent studies argue that millennials are much more concerned about corporate social responsibility practices. Price does not take the height spot in their priorities. It still is an important factor but does not take the top spot (Chatzopoulou & de Kiewiet, 2021).

Social media has been playing an important role in creating awareness regarding sustainable consumption and helped refine the millennial mindset over sustainable consumption (Ali et al., 2023). Millennial students exhibit sensitivity to sustainability issues, endorse labelling and certification systems to communicate production information, and express a desire for innovative processes to mitigate environmental impacts (Bollani et al., 2019).

Generation Z has more spenders than savers (Vojvodić, 2019). Regarding sustainability, Gen Z is commonly defined as a consumer cohort that feels that businesses and their goods ought to be sustainable (Williams & Hodges, 2022). This concern over sustainability has even caused new industries to be set up towards green consumption. Modern technologies play a vital role in defining consumer experiences for Gen Z. Studies have shown that Gen Z relies on and expects to make informed decisions using technology (Vojvodić, 2019).

Gen Z is more attentive towards problems such as climate change and poverty. This makes them believe that businesses have a responsibility to tackle these challenges and operate in a manner that addresses these issues. Gen Z prefers to buy from brands that address these issues over those companies that overlook them (Porter Novelli/Cone, 2019).

2.2 Barriers to Sustainable Consumption

Being eager to move towards sustainable consumption does not always lead to the same purchasing behaviour. The attitude-behaviour gap delineates the disparity between consumers' attitudes and their actual purchasing actions, frequently associated with younger consumers due to their perceived inconsistency in buying patterns (Sudbury-Riley & Boltner, 2010). The gap exists because the intent for sustainable approaches does not always allow consumers to go beyond their purchasing abilities (Carrington et al., 2010).

Recent studies highlight various barriers to sustainable apparel consumption, including consumer cynicism, lack of knowledge about environmental impacts and sustainable options, and indifference toward social and environmental concerns in purchasing decisions. While adolescents express concern about sustainability, factors such as cost, convenience, peer pressure, and fashion influence their consumption behaviours more than sustainability considerations (Williams & Hodges, 2022). There is also a common conception that the changes in their consumption towards sustainability will cause no effect on the larger scale of things (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009, p. 196).

3. Research Questions / Aims of the Research

The aim of the research is to identify the elements that impact sustainable consumption across two distinct cohorts, Generation Z and Millennials, while also gaining insight into their behaviour and knowledge about environmental sustainability. We created a series of objectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of this subject:

Objective 1: Determine the level of awareness and education regarding environmental sustainability within the Millennials and Generation Z and how this impacts their consumption behaviour; Objective 2: Examine and calculate the media exposure frequency with information about sustainable consumption and what is the order of the channels; Objective 3: Identify the main motivations and barriers to sustainable consumption within the two generations. This includes what drives their sustainable behaviours and the challenges they face in maintaining these habits; Objective 4: Measure how Millennials and Generation Z perceive their impact on the environment through their consumption choices and who they believe should be responsible for educating the public about sustainability.

4. Research Methods

In the first part of our research paper, we made exploratory research on the existing literature that gave us a general framework about the Generational Perspectives on Sustainable Consumption: Exploring Consumer Behaviour of Millennials and Generation Z. For the second part, we made quantitative research using the survey method to gain essential insights from the two generations investigated. We administrated the survey on the Google Forms platform during January 2024 and March 2024 and we focused on finding respondents who meet the main criteria for participating in the study, that is, being part of one of the generations: Generation Z or Millennials. Our sample size was 207 respondents, both male and female, which can be observed in Table 1. We have decided to present a part of our findings in form of graphs and for a better understanding, we made a description followed by an interpretation and some general conclusions of the most relevant graphs that help us fulfil our objectives.

Table 1. Sample Structure

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	104	50.24
Male	103	49.76
Age Group		
Generation Z	121	58.45
Millennials	86	41.55
Education		
Master's Degree	160	77.29
Bachelor's Degree	33	15.94
Doctorate	12	5.80
High School	1	0.48
Other	1	0.48
Environment		
Urban	70	33.83
Suburban	78	37.68
Rural	59	28.50
Prefer not to say	0	0

Source: author's contribution.

5. Findings

Objective 1: Determine the level of awareness and education regarding environmental sustainability within the Millennials and Generation Z and how this impacts their consumption behaviour.

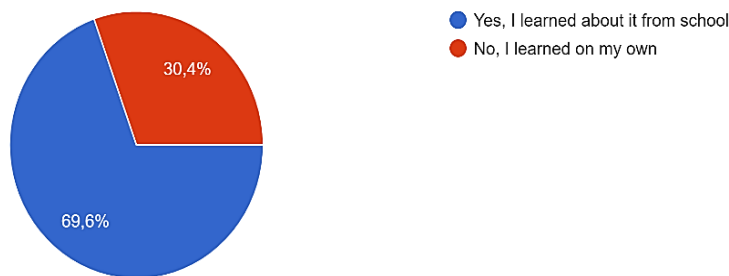
In order to do this analysis, we focused on Question number 3 where 30.4% of respondents said that they learnt on their own while 69.6% learnt about it from

school. After making a crosstab between the two generations and Question 3, our findings based on our sample size of 207 respondents were the following:

Figure 2. Google Forms graphic result from the survey

Did you receive education or participate in activities related to environmental sustainability during your schooling years?

207 răspunsuri



Source: Google Forms Platform.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation results

Millennials		Generation Z	
Learned on their own	24	Learned on their own	39
Learned from school	62	Learned from school	82

Source: author's contribution.

After making a cross-tabulation analysis, we went further to see if there is any statistical difference in the results, and we performed a chi-square test. The findings were:

Table 3. Statistical analysis

χ^2 =Chi-square	<i>p</i> -value=Probability value	<i>df</i> = Degrees of Freedom
0.263	0.608	1

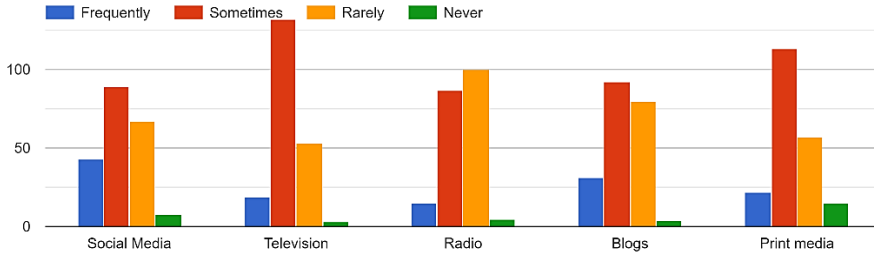
Source: author's contribution.

Based on the p-value, we can assume that there is no statistical difference between how Millennials and Generation Z learnt about environmental sustainability. In the context of our survey, both generations had similar exposure to education regarding the environment.

Objective 2: Examine and calculate the media exposure frequency with information about sustainable consumption and what is the order of the channels. This objective will help identify the most effective channels for disseminating information on sustainable practices.

Figure 3. Google Forms graphic result from the survey

How often do you come across information or discussions related to sustainable consumption on those information sources?



Source: Google Forms Platform.

Table 4. Semantic Differential Scale Analysis

	4	3	2	1
	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Social Media	43	89	67	8
Television	19	132	53	3
Radio	15	87	100	5
Blogs	31	92	80	4
Print Media	22	113	57	15

Source: author's contribution.

Using the semantic differential scale, we assigned decreasing scores from 4 to 1 for each frequency level as seen in Table 3. Further, we calculated the average score for each channel and established a top of the channels where the respondents of the study found information about sustainable consumption. The scores showed that the most frequent information was on social media and television channels followed by Blogs, Print Media, and Radio. These results show us the fact that both generations found information on the mentioned channels and that they were not deprived of it.

$$\text{Medium Score Social Media: } 43 \times 4 + 89 \times 3 + 67 \times 2 + 8 \times 1 : 207 = 2.80 \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Medium Score Television: } 19 \times 4 + 132 \times 3 + 53 \times 2 + 3 \times 1 : 207 = 2.80 \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Medium Score Radio: } 15 \times 4 + 87 \times 3 + 100 \times 2 + 5 \times 1 : 207 = 2.54 \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Medium Score Blogs: } 31 \times 4 + 92 \times 3 + 80 \times 2 + 4 \times 1 : 207 = 2.72 \quad (4)$$

$$\text{Medium Score Print Media: } 22 \times 4 + 113 \times 3 + 57 \times 2 + 15 \times 1 : 207 = 2.68 \quad (5)$$

Objective 3: Identify the main motivations and barriers to sustainable consumption within the two generations. This includes what drives their sustainable behaviours and the challenges they face in maintaining these habits.

After performing a frequency analysis of the motivations among the respondents, our findings were: Concern about future generations: 57 responses; Ethical values:

54 responses; Personal health: 46 responses; Environmental concern: 40 responses; Social influence: 10 responses.

We used a Chi-Square test to determine if there are statistically significant differences in the distribution of motivations and challenges across different age groups. The results were the following:

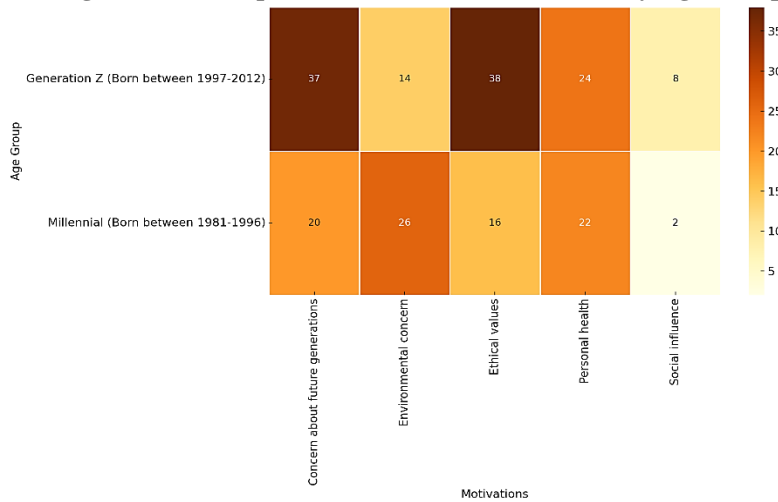
Table 5. Statistical analysis

χ^2 =Chi-square	<i>p</i> -value=Probability value
15.86	0.0032

Source: author’s contribution.

Since the p-value is less than 0.05, we can conclude that there are statistically significant differences in motivations between the two age groups. This indicates that the factors motivating sustainable behaviours vary depending on the age group of the respondents.

Figure 4. Heatmap of Distribution of Motivations by Age Group



Source: author’s contribution.

We can see in the Heatmap that Generation Z shows a higher inclination towards ethical values and concern for future generations, while Millennials are more motivated by environmental concern and personal health.

We conducted a similar analysis of the barriers faced by the two generations, and the results were:

Table 6. Statistical analysis

χ^2 =Chi-square	<i>p</i> -value=Probability value
0.76	0.944

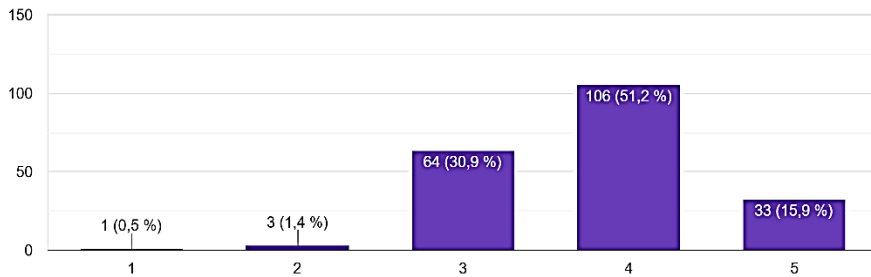
Source: author’s contribution.

Since the p-value is significantly higher than 0.05, we can state that there is no statistically significant difference in the challenges faced by the two age groups. This implies that both Generation Z and Millennials encounter similar barriers when trying to maintain sustainable consumption habits.

Objective 4: Measure how Millennials and Generation Z perceive their impact on the environment through their consumption choices and whom they believe should be responsible for educating the public about sustainability.

Figure 5. Google Forms graphic result from the survey

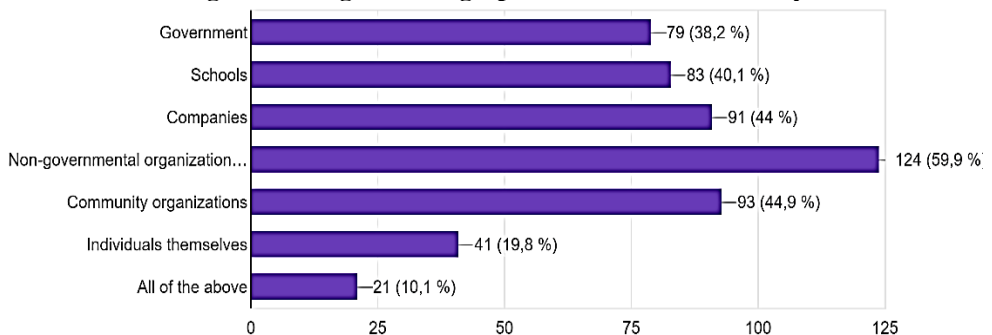
How effective do you think your individual sustainable consumption efforts are in making a positive impact on the environment? 1- Not effective at all 2...r/Nor effective 4- Effective 5- Extremely effective
207 răspunsuri



Source: Google Forms Platform.

The responses from the two generations on how effective they think their individual sustainable consumption efforts are making a positive impact on the environment are distributed as follows: 51.2% find their efforts effective; 30.9% see them as Neither/Nor effective; 15.9% believe they are extremely effective; Only 1.9% view their efforts as either Slightly effective or Not effective at all.

Figure 6. Google Forms graphic result from the survey



Source: Google Forms Platform.

Respondents considered that responsible for educating the public about sustainability should be NGOs, followed by Community organisations, companies, schools, government, and individuals themselves, and 10.1% of respondents considered that all of the above options should be taken into account.

The results suggest that Millennials and Generation Z generally perceive their sustainable consumption habits as effective and think that a collective approach regarding sustainability education would be effective.

6. Conclusions

Our research has focused on the generational perspectives of Millennials and Generation Z regarding sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour. Based on our findings, we provided information about their motivations and barriers regarding sustainable consumption, determined the level of awareness and education into the subject and the channels that provided them with this information, as well as how effective they think their efforts are in making a positive impact on the environment and who did they consider responsible for educating the public about sustainability.

We discovered that both generations had similar exposure to education regarding the environment and also were not deprived of information. The main channels where they found information were Social Media, Television, Blogs, Print Media, and Radio. Our recommendation to those who want to communicate on this topic is to integrate both the channels less frequented by respondents and the most common ones. We believe that a general and harmonious integration of all channels can bring results in increasing the level of awareness.

We found some differences in motivations between the two age groups and we discovered that Generation Z shows a great interest in ethical values and concern for future generations and Millennials are motivated by environmental concern and personal health. These differences between motivations can help us better understand why each generation gets involved and what stimuli that make them act on sustainable consumption. Regarding the barriers, we found out that they encounter similar ones to maintain sustainable consumption habits. Also, both generations perceive their sustainable consumption habits as effective and think that the approach for this topic on the public should be done collectively but mainly by NGOs, community organisations, companies, schools, government, and individuals themselves.

However, our study was limited by the sample size and we believe that future studies could have a larger number of respondents. These results can help companies that address the public from the two investigated generations to adapt their business, communication, and marketing strategies according to the behaviour and expectations of Generation Z and Millennials in order to obtain the most satisfactory results.

In conclusion, sustainable consumption is a practice that must be integrated into the everyday life of all current and future generations in order to reduce as much as possible the negative effects of consumerism and also to live in a healthy and sustainable environment.

Acknowledgment

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