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THROUGH THE MORAL LENSES: GENERATION Z'S INTENTION TO PURCHASE SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS ENDORSED BY INFLUENCERS

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing Generation Z's pivotal role in advancing sustainable consumption, this research seeks to explain the underlying mechanisms driving their intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by social media influencers. To achieve this, we propose and empirically validate a two-pathway model encompassing identity-based and endorsement-based pathways, both defined by individuals' moral considerations. Sustainable products were defined as socially responsible, such as, local, eco-friendly, or handmade products. Data were collected through a self-administered online survey completed by 200 respondents. The findings show that the endorsement-based pathway, driven by moral judgment of social media influencers' behavior and parasocial interactions with them, has a much stronger impact than the identity-based pathway, driven by reflective moral attentiveness. The results also reveal that, despite Generation Z's strong sustainability attitudes, their intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by social media influencers is restrained, possibly due to limited trust in social media influencers and weak parasocial interactions with them. By integrating insights from sustainability research, influencer marketing, and moral psychology, this paper explores the role of moral considerations in Generation Z's intention to purchase sustainable products. The proposed model contributes not only to the literature on sustainable consumption and influencer marketing, but also to a broader understanding of how moral considerations influence consumer decision-making regarding sustainable products.

Keywords: sustainable products, Generation Z, sustainability attitudes, moral attentiveness, moral judgment

1. INTRODUCTION

Responsible consumption and production, among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations (2025), stands out as particularly critical (Thakur *et al.*, 2025). While consumer research over the past decade has examined various perspectives on sustainable consumption (White *et al.*, 2019; Munaro *et al.*, 2024), our study narrows this broad topic in four important aspects.

First, we focus our research on Generation Z (Gen Z), recognized as the most sustainability-conscious generation to date (Bulut *et al.*, 2017). As an increasing number of individuals in this cohort influence household purchases (Chang and Chang, 2023), they play a key role in driving the growing demand for sustainable consumption, even in emerging markets (Dabija, 2018). Second, given our focus on Gen Z, we narrow the research to examine the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping sustainable purchase decisions, as this cohort is particularly susceptible to SMI endorsements (Orea-Giner and Fuste-Forne, 2023; Barari *et al.*, 2026). Third, in understanding SMIs' influence on Gen Z, we move away from the common emphasis on SMIs' and posts' characteristics (Munaro *et al.*, 2024). Instead, we focus on followers' traits, especially moral considerations. Fourth, we narrow the concept of sustainable consumption to products produced by small producers (e.g., local, eco-friendly, handmade). Thus, we move beyond the common emphasis on environmental aspects of sustainability found in much previous research (Gericke *et al.*, 2019; White *et al.*, 2019) and equally highlight the social and economic dimensions of sustainability.

Building on this foundation, the purpose of our research is to understand how Gen Z's morality (moral judgment and moral attentiveness), as well as the parasocial relationships they form with SMIs, influence Gen Z's intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by SMIs. Given Gen Z's strong sustainability orientation and the considerable influence of SMIs on this generation (Casalegno *et al.*, 2022; Barari *et al.*, 2026), our key contribution lies in identifying and empirically testing the distinct yet complementary pathways through which Gen Z's personal traits influence their sustainable consumption via sustainability attitudes and trust in SMIs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Research shows that Gen Z is inclined toward recycling, making conscious dietary choices, and reducing clothing consumption (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022), giving preference to local, natural, or non-mass-produced products (Orea-Giner and Fuste-Forne, 2023), and has a strong general tendency toward sustainable consumption (Casalegno *et al.*, 2022; Dabija, 2018).

A substantial body of research has been dedicated to identifying the psychological drivers of sustainable consumption. Notably, White *et al.* (2019) proposed five key psychological pathways influencing sustainable behavior: social influence, habit formation, individual self, feelings and cognition, and tangibility. These elements form the SHIFT framework, which, although originally focused on environmental sustainability, provides a foundation for understanding holistic sustainable behavior. Building on this notion, Grunwald *et al.* (2025)

explored the comprehensive transformation of student (primarily Gen Z) behavior toward sustainability, highlighting social influence and individual self as particularly influential SHIFT factors.

In relation to the individual self, one of the most comprehensive concepts capturing an individual's sustainability profile is sustainability consciousness, introduced by Gericke *et al.* (2019). It consists of sustainability attitudes, sustainability knowingness and sustainability behaviors, each related to the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability. Extensive research, primarily grounded in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) shows that Gen Z possesses high levels of environmental and sustainability consciousness (Su *et al.*, 2019) and that these traits strongly shape their intentions to engage in sustainable and environmentally friendly purchasing (Casalegno *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding social influence factors, Gen Z's purchase intentions are generally strongly shaped by SMIs (Barari *et al.*, 2026), as are their sustainable purchase intentions (Orea-Ginner and Fuste-Forne, 2023). As content creators with many followers on social media, SMIs share their tastes and product reviews within their field of interest (Jun and Yi, 2020). They can be very effective in shaping followers' sustainable purchase intentions and behaviors due to their various personal attributes and content characteristics (Munaro *et al.*, 2024). Many of these characteristics foster consumer trust in SMIs, which is one of the main drivers of their purchase intention (Breves *et al.*, 2021).

To advance understanding of Gen Z's sustainable consumption, we propose an integrated theoretical model that combines insights from sustainability psychology, influencer marketing, and moral psychology. Specifically, we develop a dual-pathway model that synthesizes identity-based and endorsement-based factors, both examined through the moral lenses. The first pathway explores how moral attentiveness influences purchase intention through sustainability attitudes. The second pathway examines how moral judgment of SMIs' behavior and parasocial interactions with SMIs influence purchase intention through the formation of trust in SMIs.

The identity-based pathway begins with moral attentiveness, defined as "the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1027). This construct comprises two distinct dimensions: reflective moral attentiveness (deliberate consideration of moral implications in decision-making situations) and perceptive moral attentiveness (spontaneous recognition of moral elements in everyday situations), both of which predict ethical decision-making across various domains (Reynolds, 2008).

Moral identity theory (Aquino and Reed, 2002) provides the theoretical foundation for linking moral attentiveness to sustainability attitudes. Individuals with strong moral identity possess heightened sensitivity to moral issues across various contexts and are more likely to internalize moral concerns as central to their self-concept. Research in environmental psychology demonstrates that individuals with higher moral sensitivity are more likely to perceive environmental issues as morally relevant and to develop stronger environmental concern

(e.g., Dunne *et al.*, 2024). In sustainability contexts, individuals with high reflective moral attentiveness engage in systematic evaluation of the moral dimensions of their consumption choices, leading them to consider the broader environmental and social implications of their purchasing decisions (Peloza *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, individuals with high perceptive moral attentiveness demonstrate heightened sensitivity to moral cues in their environment, making them more likely to notice and internalize sustainability-related information and concerns (Hunt and Vitell, 2006). Both dimensions serve as cognitive prerequisites for developing sustainability attitudes. Thus, we propose:

H1: Reflective moral attentiveness is positively related to sustainability attitudes.

H2: Perceptive moral attentiveness is positively related to sustainability attitudes.

The endorsement-based pathway of our model operates through trust in SMIs that emerges from both moral judgments of SMIs and parasocial interactions with them. Alongside the moral dimension central to this study, the model incorporates parasocial interactions, as the theory of parasocial interaction is among those that best explain how SMIs impact sustainable consumption (Munaro *et al.*, 2024). Inclusion of parasocial interactions prevents the model from attributing overly high importance to morality-based predictors.

Moral judgment defined as “the degree to which a portrayal, event, or behavior is morally acceptable to the individual” (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990, p. 634) provides the moral foundation for trust. The relationship between moral judgment and trust is grounded in Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) Model of trust, which identifies perceived integrity as a fundamental component of trustworthiness. Studies in organizational behavior show that perceptions of moral character predict trust in leadership (Brown and Treviño, 2006), while consumer research demonstrates that perception of a seller's ethical behavior influences consumer trust (Mansouri *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, we propose:

H3: Moral judgment of SMIs' behavior is positively related to trust in SMIs.

Parasocial interactions, defined as a media user's one-sided experience of intimacy with a media persona (Horton and Wohl, 1956), create the emotional foundation for trust through perceived authenticity, closeness, and familiarity (Chung and Cho, 2017). Research in SMI marketing demonstrates that consumers who develop stronger parasocial interactions with SMIs exhibit higher levels of trust in their recommendations and endorsements (Lou and Yuan, 2019), with strong parasocial interactions potentially leading to “blind trust”, where followers bypass critical evaluation due to emotional connection (Breves *et al.*, 2021). Hence the hypothesis:

H4: Parasocial interaction with SMIs is positively related to trust in SMIs.

Both pathways converge on purchase intention through their respective mediating mechanisms. The identity-based pathway operates through sustainability attitudes. According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), attitudes shape purchase intention, and research consistently demonstrates that environmental concern and awareness predict pro-

environmental behavioural intentions, including sustainable purchasing (Paul *et al.*, 2016). Hence the hypothesis:

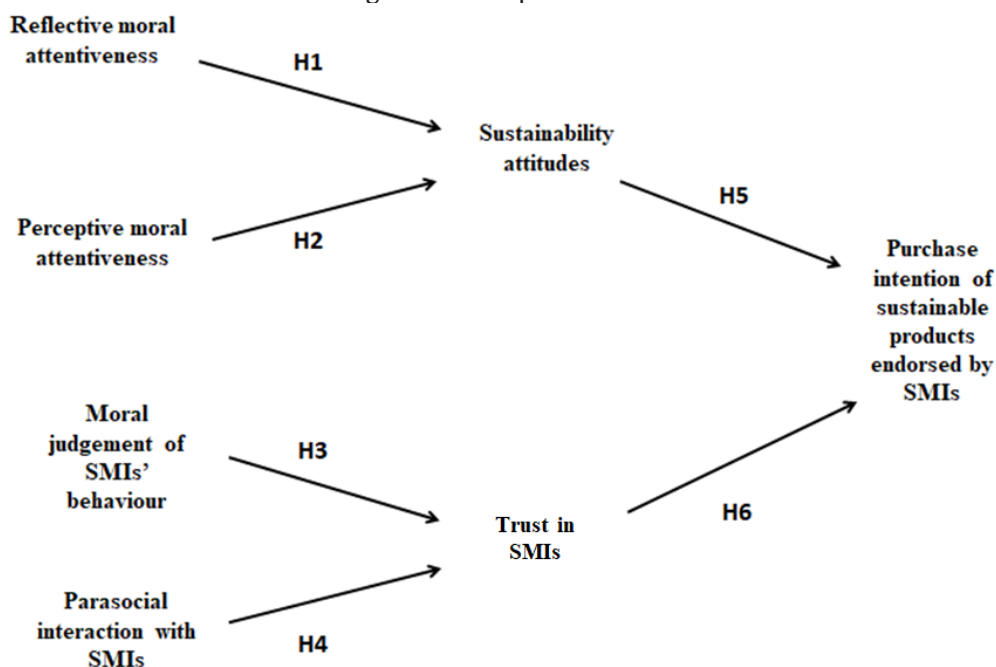
H5: Sustainability attitudes positively influence the purchase intention of sustainable products endorsed by SMIs.

The endorsement-based pathway operates through trust in SMIs. Trust serves as a fundamental determinant of purchase intentions, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty or information asymmetry (Al-Adwan *et al.*, 2022). In sustainability contexts, consumers often face challenges in evaluating the authentic environmental benefits of products, creating information asymmetries that heighten the importance of trust (Chen and Chang, 2012). When consumers trust the source of sustainability information, they are more willing to rely on that information in their purchase decisions (Rizomyliotis, 2024). Therefore, we propose:

H6: Trust in SMIs positively influences the purchase intention of sustainable products endorsed by SMIs.

Figure 1 illustrates the elaborated dual-pathway model, representing the complementary mechanisms driving sustainable purchase intentions among Gen Z when exposed to sustainability-focused influencer content.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Source: authors

3. METHODOLOGY

The survey instrument comprised several socio-demographic questions and 44 items related to the seven studied concepts, measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The items were adopted as validated from previous studies, with those for the last four concepts adjusted to the study context, as shown in Table 1. The original items were translated into Croatian by the first author and back-translated into English by the second author. During this process, several Croatian items were refined. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 24 marketing students. After filling in the questionnaire, they participated in a group discussion, which revealed that they did not typically have one particular SMI in mind while completing the questionnaire. Instead, it would have been much easier for them to respond to questions about their attitudes and behaviors toward SMIs in general. Therefore, we adjusted the items to reflect opinions related to SMIs in general.

Table 1. Scales in the survey

Construct and reference	Items
Sustainability attitudes (SA) Gericke <i>et al.</i> , 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – I think that using more natural resources than we need does not threaten the health and well-being of people in the future. (reverse-coded) – I think that we need stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment. – I think that it is important to take measures against problems which have to do with climate change. – I think that everyone ought to be given the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, values and skills that are necessary to live sustainably. – I think that we who are living now should make sure that people in the future enjoy the same quality of life as we do today. – I think that women and men throughout the world must be given the same opportunities for education and employment. – I think that companies have a responsibility to reduce the use of packaging and disposable articles. – I think it is important to reduce poverty. – I think that companies in rich countries should give employees in poor nations the same conditions as in rich countries.
Perceptive moral attentiveness (PMA) Reynolds, 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In a typical day, I face several ethical dilemmas. – I often have to choose between doing what's right and doing something that's wrong. – I regularly face decisions that have significant ethical implications. – My life has been filled with one moral predicament after another. – Many of the decisions that I make have ethical dimensions to them. – I rarely face ethical dilemmas. (reverse-coded) – I frequently encounter ethical situations.

<p>Reflective moral attentiveness (RMA)</p> <p>Reynolds, 2008</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions. - I think about the morality of my actions almost every day. - I often find myself pondering about ethical issues. - I often reflect on the moral aspects of my decisions. - I like to think about ethics.
<p>Parasocial interactions with SMIs (PSI)</p> <p>Lee and Watkins, 2016</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When I'm watching influencers, I feel as if I am part of their group. - Influencers are like old friends to me. - I would like to meet influencers in person. - If there were a story about influencers in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it. - Influencers make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends. - When influencers show me how they feel about a brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand.
<p>Moral judgment of SMIs' behavior (MJ)</p> <p>Reidenbach and Robin, 1990</p>	<p>I consider the behavior of influencers on social media to be:</p> <p>Unfair – Fair</p> <p>Unjust – Just</p> <p>Not morally right – Morally right</p> <p>Not acceptable to my family – Acceptable to my family</p> <p>Traditionally unacceptable – Traditionally acceptable</p> <p>Culturally unacceptable – Culturally acceptable</p> <p>Does not violate an unspoken promise – Violates an unspoken promise</p> <p>Does not violate an unwritten contract – Violates an unwritten contract</p>
<p>Trust in SMIs (TRUST)</p> <p>Kim and Kim, 2021</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influencers can be relied upon on their content. - I believe what influencers say. - Influencers are straightforward and honest even though their self-interests are involved. - Influencers would not tell a lie even if they could gain by it. - I believe that influencers would not try to take advantage of the followers.
<p>Purchase intention of sustainable products endorsed by SMIs (PI)</p> <p>Hsieh <i>et al.</i>, 2023</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I would buy a product whose consumption is socially responsible (e. g., local, eco-friendly, handmade) when promoted by influencers. - I would intend to buy a product whose consumption is socially responsible (e.g., local, eco-friendly, handmade) when promoted by influencers. - I would be interested in buying a product whose consumption is socially responsible (e.g., local, eco-friendly, handmade) when promoted by influencers. - It is very likely that I would buy a product whose consumption is socially responsible (e.g., local, eco-friendly, handmade) when promoted by influencers.

Source: authors

Data were collected online via Google Forms from May to July 2025. The sample included members of Gen Z, i.e., those born between 1995 and 2006, as the aim was to include only adults. Convenient snowball sampling was employed by inviting students from several

universities to complete the questionnaire and forward it to their friends aged 18 to 30. After 200 responses were collected, we proceeded to the data analysis phase. Seven responses were excluded from the sample: two trial responses (the first two collected), one duplicate submission (reported by the respondent), three from respondents born outside the 1995–2006 range, and one “empty” submission (no consent given). Data were analyzed using JASP 0.96.0 (JASP team, 2026).

4. EMPIRICAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Sample description

On average, respondents were born in 2003. Frequencies of other demographic data are presented in Table 2. The majority of respondents are from Primorje-Gorski Kotar (N = 74) and Istria (N = 40) counties, while most other Croatian counties are represented by between 1 and 13 respondents. A large majority of respondents are female (N = 154), students (N = 169), and reside in urban areas (N = 116). Regarding employment status, the results are more varied, with the largest group working only through student services (N = 99).

Table 2. Sample description

Category	Option	N
County	Primorje-Gorski Kotar	74
	Istria	40
	Karlovac	13
	Varaždin	10
	Other	56
Gender	Female	154
	Male	37
	Refuse to respond	2
Urban vs. rural community	Urban	116
	Rural	47
	Refuse to respond / Do not know	30
Employment status	Works only through student services	99
	Unemployed	48
	Employed	40
	Other	6
Student status	Students (undergraduate and graduate)	169
	Others	22

Source: authors

4. 2 Measurement and descriptive statistics

Before testing the model, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of each construct. Two reverse-coded items (one in SA and one in PMA) demonstrated poor measurement properties and reduced the overall validity of the scales. Therefore, they were omitted from the final analysis presented in Table 3. As shown in the table, all constructs demonstrate high internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded significant results, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy exceeded the recommended cut-off of .6 (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Table 3. Descriptive and measurement statistics

Construct	Item	St. factor loading	Cron. alpha	CR	AVE	Mean	SD
SA	sa2	0.85	0.95	0.95	0.79	5.84	1.39
	sa3	0.85					
	sa4	0.95					
	sa5	0.90					
	sa6	0.94					
	sa7	0.83					
	sa8	0.95					
RMA	rma1	0.87	0.93	0.93	0.78	4.53	1.58
	rma2	0.92					
	rma3	0.89					
	rma4	0.93					
	rma5	0.81					
PMA	pma1	0.91	0.91	0.91	0.67	3.55	1.34
	pma2	0.80					
	pma3	0.89					
	pma4	0.70					
	pma5	0.76					
	pma7	0.84					
PSI	psi1	0.89	0.91	0.91	0.73	2.71	1.47
	psi2	0.89					
	psi3	0.86					
	psi4	0.78					
	psi5	0.92					
	psi6	0.78					

MJ	mj1	0.89	0.88	0.88	0.55	3.99	0.94
	mj2	0.93					
	mj3	0.79					
	mj4	0.64					
	mj5	0.54					
	mj6	0.60					
	mj7	0.75					
	mj8	0.69					
TRUST	trust1	0.86	0.90	0.90	0.73	2.67	1.27
	trust2	0.91					
	trust3	0.83					
	trust4	0.83					
	trust5	0.84					
PI	pi1	0.93	0.96	0.96	0.90	3.81	1.65
	pi2	0.99					
	pi3	0.94					
	pi4	0.94					

Source: authors

Item scores within each scale were averaged to create composite variables for the path analysis, as also presented in Table 3. The mean values of the studied constructs reveal generally low levels across most concepts, particularly TRUST ($m = 2.67$, $s. d. = 1.27$) and PSI ($m = 2.71$, $s. d. = 1.47$).

The heterotrait-monotrait ratio was used to assess the discriminant validity of the constructs (Table 4), as it has been proposed as a sensitive and reliable method for evaluating discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Table 4. Discriminant validity

	SA	RMA	PMA	PSI	MJ	TRUST
RMA	0.45					
PMA	0.21	0.70				
PSI	0.07	0.17	0.29			
MJ	0.10	0.07	0.07	0.31		
TRUST	0.07	0.08	0.24	0.77	0.40	
PI	0.23	0.13	0.08	0.47	0.33	0.46

Source: authors

Since all correlations were below 0.85, the results indicate satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs.

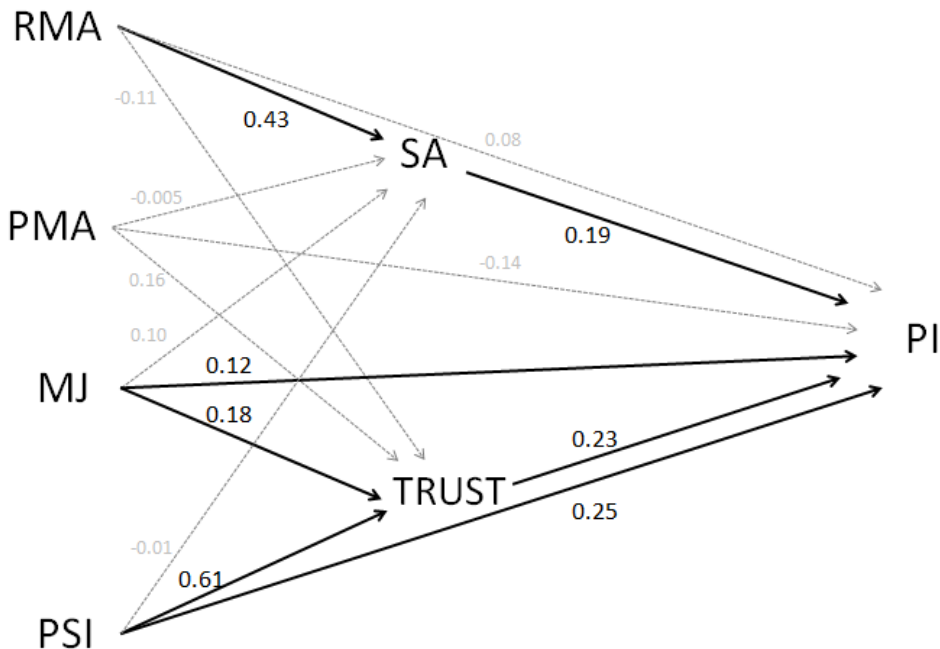
4.3 Path analysis with multiple mediators

Path analysis in JASP was used to test the hypothesized dual-mediation model, allowing for simultaneous estimation of direct and indirect effects among all variables. The analysis was conducted using standardized path coefficients with statistical significance assessed via bootstrap confidence intervals based on 1,000 resamples and a 95% confidence level.

The mediation model explained 74% of the variance in PI ($R^2 = 0.74$), 58% in SA ($R^2 = 0.58$) and 70% in TRUST ($R^2 = 0.70$), indicating that the predictor variables were particularly effective at explaining TRUST. Figure 2 shows path coefficients, with black, full-lined arrows representing significant relationships.

RMA significantly predicted SA ($\beta = 0.43, p < 0.01$), indicating a strong positive relationship. However, PMA did not significantly predict SA ($\beta = < -0.01, p = 0.94$). For the endorsement-based pathway, both MJ ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.01$) and PSI ($\beta = 0.61, p < 0.01$) significantly predicted TRUST. PSI showed the strongest relationship with TRUST among all predictor-mediator paths. Both mediators significantly predicted PI; SA had a significant positive effect on PI ($\beta = 0.19, p = 0.01$), and TRUST significantly predicted PI ($\beta = 0.23, p = 0.01$).

Figure 2. Path coefficients



Source: authors

Among the direct effects from predictors to PI, PSI showed a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), while MJ was marginally significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.05$). The direct effects of RMA ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.35$) and PMA ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = 0.12$) were not statistically significant. All direct, indirect, and total effects are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Mediation analysis

	std. est.	std. error	p
Direct effects			
RMA→PI	0.08	0.09	0.35
PMA→PI	-0.14	0.09	0.12
MJ→PI	0.12	0.06	0.05
PSI→PI	0.25	0.08	< 0.01
Indirect effects			
RMA→SA→PI	0.08	0.04	0.02
RMA→TRUST→PI	-0.03	0.02	0.22
PMA→SA→PI	< -0.01	0.01	0.95
PMA→TRUST→PI	0.04	0.03	0.15
MJ→SA→PI	0.02	0.02	0.32
MJ→TRUST→PI	0.04	0.02	0.03
PSI→SA→PI	< -0.01	0.01	0.85
PSI→TRUST→PI	0.14	0.06	0.01
Total effects			
RMA→PI	0.14	0.08	0.11
PMA→PI	-0.10	0.09	0.26
MJ→PI	0.18	0.06	< 0.01
PSI→PI	0.39	0.07	< 0.01

Source: authors

Only one significant indirect effect emerged through SA: RMA→SA→PI ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.02$). The indirect effect of PMA through SA was not significant ($\beta = < -0.01$, $p = 0.95$). Both predictors showed significant indirect effects through TRUST: MJ→TRUST→PI ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.03$) and PSI→TRUST→PI ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.01$). The PSI indirect effect was notably stronger. As shown in Table 5, the indirect effects not predicted by the conceptual model were also non-significant, further supporting the model's conceptual robustness. The total effects revealed that MJ ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) and PSI ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$) had significant overall relationships with PI.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results revealed that the endorsement-based pathway, driven by parasocial interactions with SMIs and moral judgment of SMIs, substantially outweighs the identity-based pathway driven by reflective moral attentiveness. Specifically, both endorsement-based drivers exert direct effects on purchase intention as well as indirect effects mediated by trust in SMIs. On the other hand, identity-based pathway shows only an indirect effect of reflective moral attentiveness through sustainability attitude, and neither a direct nor indirect effect of perceptive moral attentiveness. In the following sections, we first explain the potential reason why the endorsement-based pathway outweighs the identity-based one and then consider the meaning of this finding. We subsequently explore possible reasons why perceived moral identity did not emerge as a significant predictor in the model and discuss the role of morality in the model in general. Finally, we address the practical implications these results have for decision makers in various stakeholder groups.

Parasocial interactions with SMIs exhibit by far the strongest effect in the model, both directly and indirectly through trust in SMIs. This is the main reason why the endorsement-based pathway outweighs the identity-based one. The result aligns with Munaro *et al.* (2024), who emphasize the importance of parasocial interaction theory in explaining how SMIs impact sustainable consumption, and with Breves *et al.* (2021), who highlight the powerful influence of trust on social media. Our results contribute to this discourse by showing that individuals' moral attentiveness and sustainability attitudes, which, according to moral identity theory (Aquino and Reed, 2002) and theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), should drive sustainable consumption, have a weaker influence on intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by SMIs than parasocial interactions with SMIs and trust in them. This may indicate that consumers are more influenced by the mere fact that SMIs promote products than by the products' sustainability attributes. Alternatively, it may reflect Gen Z's limited perception of local, eco-friendly, and handmade products as inherently morally right or sustainable choices.

However, the strong influence of parasocial interactions on purchase intention should also be interpreted in light of the descriptive statistics, which indicate relatively low mean levels of parasocial interaction, trust in SMIs, and purchase intention, but a high mean level of sustainability attitudes. These findings may imply that Gen Z's high sustainability attitudes do not convert strongly into purchase intention because SMIs' endorsement hinders that. In other words, involving SMIs in the promotion of sustainable products may disrupt rather than strengthen the conversion of positive attitudes into purchase intention, because Gen Z does not feel strong parasocial interaction with them nor trusts them much.

The finding that only reflective, not perceptive, moral attentiveness operates through sustainability attitudes suggests that deliberate moral consideration, rather than spontaneous moral sensitivity, drives sustainability attitudes. This may be because Reynold's (2008) perceptive moral attentiveness instrument used in the study assesses how often respondents encounter moral dilemmas. Since Gen Z is still early in life and career and generally holds

less social power, they have fewer opportunities to make morally charged decisions. If the instrument measured Gen Z's ability to recognize moral dimensions when exposed to such decisions, the results might have differed.

Despite the lack of influence of perceptible moral attentiveness and the strongest effect of parasocial interactions with SMIs in the model, the role of morality remains important in both model's pathways. In the endorsement-based pathway, Gen Z's moral judgment of SMIs' behavior influences their trust in SMIs. This aligns with Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) model of trust. At the same time, consistent with moral identity theory (Aquino and Reed, 2002), in the identity-based pathway, Gen Z's reflective moral attentiveness influences their sustainability attitudes.

Our results have important practical implications. Small producers of local, eco-friendly, or handmade products can benefit from collaborating with SMIs whom Gen Z trusts and with whom they have strong parasocial interactions. However, partnering with untrustworthy SMIs can be counterproductive, lowering Gen Z's purchase intentions. For SMIs, these findings underscore the critical need to build trust and meaningful parasocial connections with Gen Z, who, according to our results, show scepticism towards SMIs. Finally, policymakers should mandate clear labelling of paid collaborations with small producers to enhance follower trust and transparency in influencer communication. Additionally, they should support small producers in initiating partnerships with verified, sustainability-focused influencers by creating platforms that facilitate these connections.

6. CONCLUSION

This research advances understanding of Gen Z's drivers of sustainable consumption. Building on previous studies that identified key psychological determinants of sustainable consumption (e.g., White *et al.*, 2019; Gericke *et al.*, 2019) alongside SMIs' effect on sustainable consumption (Munaro *et al.*, 2024), and introducing the lens of moral psychology, we focus on how consumer morality shapes Gen Z's intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by SMIs. To capture these dynamics, we proposed and empirically validated a two-pathway conceptual model comprising the identity-based pathway and the endorsement-based pathway.

The conceptually proposed model was empirically validated and demonstrated satisfactory statistical fit. Five out of the six hypotheses were supported (H1, H3, H4, H5, and H6) and both the identity-based and endorsement-based pathways were found to shape Gen Z's intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by SMIs. In other words, results show that Gen Z's morality (moral judgment and moral attentiveness) and the parasocial relationships they form with SMIs significantly influence their intention to purchase sustainable products endorsed by SMIs. Specifically, although the effect of parasocial interactions on trust in SMIs, and subsequently on purchase intention, is stronger than that of moral judgment and moral attentiveness, moral considerations nonetheless play a meaningful role in shaping Gen Z's sustainable purchase intentions.

This research has several limitations. First, it was conducted in Croatia primarily among students, so cultural and academic factors may have influenced the results. For example, in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, n. d.), where there is a greater emphasis on social belonging, SMIs may have a stronger impact, while in individualistic cultures, moral and personal values may dominate more significantly. Second, there was a gender imbalance in the sample, with more female respondents. As Bulut *et al.* (2017) indicate, women tend to exhibit stronger sustainable behaviors than men, which may have influenced the results. Third, we focused on local, eco-friendly, or handmade products typical for small producers, so the results should not be generalized to sustainable consumption in general as many other types of sustainable products may appeal more to Gen Z. Fourth, our pretesting indicated that framing questions about SMIs in general, rather than a specific SMI, improved respondents' ability to answer the survey; however, this approach overlooked variability in how respondents relate to and perceive different SMIs. Fifth, the survey addresses topics related to sustainability and morality, which may lead respondents to provide socially desirable answers rather than their true opinions.

Future research should address the current limitations by expanding studies to other Gen Z groups in different countries and cultural contexts, investigating other sustainable products, and focusing on different but specific SMIs. To reduce social desirability bias, respondents should be clearly assured that their answers are anonymous and that there are no right or wrong responses. Additionally, we examined purchase intentions for products whose consumption is socially responsible (e.g., local, eco-friendly, handmade) and endorsed by SMIs and found that high sustainability attitudes do not fully translate into purchase intention. Future research should explore if sustainability attitudes translate into purchase intention for such products when they are not endorsed by SMIs. Incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews could deepen understanding of these and other relationships in our model.

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KROZ MORALNI OBJEKTIV: NAMJERA GENERACIJE Z DA KUPI ODRŽIVE PROIZVODE KOJE PROMOVIRAJU INFLUENCERI

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SAŽETAK

Prepoznajući ključnu ulogu generacije Z u promicanju održive potrošnje, cilj ovoga istraživanja je objasniti temeljne mehanizme koji potiču njihovu namjeru kupnje održivih proizvoda koje promoviraju influenceri na društvenim mrežama. Kako bi se to postiglo, predložen je i empirijski potvrđen model s dva mehanizma koji obuhvaća mehanizam utemeljen na identitetu i mehanizam utemeljen na podršci (endorsement); oba su definirana moralnim razmatranjima pojedinaca. Održivi proizvodi definirani su kao društveno odgovorni; npr. lokalni, ekološki ili ručno rađeni proizvodi. Podaci su prikupljeni putem online upitnika koji je samostalno ispunilo 200 ispitanika. Rezultati su pokazali da mehanizam utemeljen na podršci, definiran moralnom prosudbom o ponašanju influencera na društvenim mrežama i parasocijalnim interakcijama s njima, ima puno jači utjecaj od mehanizma utemeljenog na identitetu, definiranog reflektivnom moralnom pažnjom. Rezultati također pokazuju da je, unatoč snažnim stavovima generacije Z o održivosti, njihova namjera kupnje održivih proizvoda koje promoviraju influenceri na društvenim mrežama suzdržana, moguće zbog ograničenog povjerenja prema influencerima na društvenim mrežama i slabih parasocijalnih interakcija s njima. Integrirajući spoznaje iz istraživanja o održivosti, influencer-marketingu i moralnoj psihologiji, ovaj rad istražuje ulogu koju moralna razmatranja imaju u namjeri generacije Z da kupi održive proizvode. Predloženi model doprinosi ne samo literaturi o održivoj potrošnji i influencer-marketingu, već i širem razumijevanju kako moralna razmatranja utječu na donošenje odluka potrošača kada su u pitanju održivi proizvodi.

Ključne riječi: održivi proizvodi, generacija Z, stavovi o održivosti, moralna pažnja, moralna prosudba

