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GENERATION Z AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SUSTAINABILITY ADVOCACY: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIETY AND CONSUMERISM

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ABSTRACT: Generation Z, social media, conscious consumerism, and sustainability are increasingly interconnected, positioning young people as important participants in environmental and social change. This paper investigates gender differences within Generation Z in sustainability advocacy in Croatia, focusing on the influence of social media and sustainable product choice as an expression of conscious consumerism. The analysis was based on valid item-level responses, with the analytical sample varying across procedures (295 valid responses for perceived social media impact, 292 for sustainable product choice, and 286 observations in the moderated regression model). Descriptive statistics, the Mann–Whitney U test, moderated regression, and regression-based mediation analysis were employed to test three hypotheses. The findings confirm that women report higher levels of sustainability advocacy (H1) and that sustainable product choice partially mediates the relationship between social media impact and participation in sustainability initiatives (H3). At the same time, social media significantly influence sustainability-related attitudes and behaviours regardless of gender, leading to the rejection of H2.

KEY WORDS: consumer behaviour, gender differences, Generation Z, social media, sustainability advocacy

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z demonstrates unique attitudes toward sustainability and social change, being widely recognized for its digital literacy and particularly for its global connectivity, as this generation has grown up with the omnipresence of social media. The views of Generation Z on sustainability are strongly shaped by platforms and digital sources of information such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Their consumer behaviour is characterized by three key features: cultural tolerance, social tolerance, and tolerance toward online diversity. Social media serve as a powerful tool for raising awareness of environmental issues and encouraging eco-conscious actions, yet they simultaneously promote consumerism through fast fashion trends and constant marketing campaigns, which contradict the very ideas of sustainability (Smaliukiene et al., 2020).

The use of social media affects social behavior, emotions, influence, overall well-being, and purchasing and consumption habits of Generation Z, even though they primarily engage with these platforms for entertainment. While the relationship between social media use and social media addiction is not significant, the relationship between social media addiction and emotional outcomes is significant (Abd Rahman & Abdul Razak, 2019, pp. 1–15). This indicates a continuous need for increased research attention on Generation Z's use of social media and its impact on social behavior, psychosomatic effects, general well-being, market-related purchasing and consumption behavior, word-of-mouth communication, branding, and consumer relationships (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017, pp. 110–116).

Members of Generation Z show strong interest in issues such as climate change and display high awareness and well-defined opinions on ethical and environmental matters (Djafarova & Foots, 2022, pp. 413–431). Their motivation and engagement are driven by factors such as information availability, economic circumstances, education, geographic location, and cultural differences (Khalil et al., 2021, p. 13804; Al-Sharafi et al., 2023, p. 107708; Confetto et al., 2023, pp. 758–774). However, the consumerist influence of social media challenges them to balance trend-driven behaviors with the ethical values they support. Consequently, Generation Z's consumption decisions are often shaped by social media pressures,

which frequently direct them toward brands that merely present themselves as “sustainable.” Despite the growing expectations of active citizen engagement and increased participation in development processes, research on interest in smart city projects has revealed Generation Z's lack of enthusiasm for this topic. The authors (Wawer et al., 2022, p. 4651) argue that their declared readiness to participate in opinion-shaping and decision-making processes does not translate into concrete action.

Nevertheless, Generation Z, being hyper-connected through social media, is considered particularly sensitive to environmental and social responsibility issues, and stands out as an important actor in advancing sustainability. Figures such as Greta Thunberg exemplify this role, leading global climate movements and emerging as key advocates of justice and sustainability, often labeled as “climate activists.” One of the first studies examining the use of social media for promoting sustainability among Generation Z in Italy found that exposure to sustainability-related content on social networks influenced sustainable habits and consumer behaviour, with results closely associated with female respondents (Confetto et al., 2023, pp. 758–774). A systematic review of scholarly publications between 2010 and 2020 revealed that gender is rarely addressed or conceptualized in sustainability transition research (17 relevant publications identified), despite gender-sensitive approaches being recognized as crucial for achieving fair and sustainable transitions (Wolfram & Kienesberger, 2023, p. 100686). Research into which gender is more sustainability-oriented indicates that gender significantly shapes green psychology and behavior, with women in China reporting higher levels of environmental protection, greater concern for ecological problems, stronger advocacy for plastic bans, and a higher intention to bring reusable bags when shopping, as well as reuse and recycle (Li et al., 2022, p. 8002).

Given that a systematic literature review identified a gap concerning the role of gender in sustainability advocacy, particularly when examining the specific interplay between Generation Z, gender differences, social media, and sustainable consumption, this study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how sustainability is interpreted and promoted among Generation Z in Croatia. The research is theoretically positioned within sustainability communication and digital consumer culture. Social media are therefore observed as communicative

environments in which sustainability-related meanings, norms, and behavioural expectations are produced, negotiated, and translated into everyday consumer choices and advocacy practices. This positioning clarifies the theoretical contribution of the study: rather than treating social media merely as information channels, the paper examines their role in connecting gendered patterns of engagement, conscious consumerism, and sustainability advocacy.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a literature review, Section 3 explains the methodology and research objectives from which the hypotheses are derived, Section 4 discusses the findings, limitations, and implications for future research, and Section 5 provides the conclusions.

GENERATION Z, SOCIAL MEDIA, CONSCIOUS CONSUMERISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRUST

GENERATION Z AND SOCIAL MEDIA: CONSUMPTION, TRUST, AND PATTERNS OF USE

The rapid and frequent development of technology has significantly transformed the use of social media, reshaped user trust, and altered the impact of consumerism. Only six years ago, a study was conducted comparing online and offline channels with the aim of determining which had a greater influence on impulsive buying. The results showed that in 2018 offline channels encouraged impulsive buying slightly more, and the managerial implication was that managers should carefully choose social media platforms to stimulate such behavior (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018, pp. 42–62). Today, the situation is very different. Online shopping has become highly prevalent, and research now focuses on the dimensions of online convenience and their influence on the cognitive and affective attitudes of Generation Z consumers as well as their impulsive online buying behavior. The findings of such studies demonstrate that relational convenience, possession convenience, post-possession convenience, transaction convenience, and evaluation convenience exert a decisive influence on cognitive and affective attitudes (Lina et al., 2022, p. 951249).

The promotion of a brand (stimulus) can generate perceptions of creativity and positive emotions among followers (organism), which in turn can affect their intention to interact (response). These conclusions, which are based on the SOR framework (Stimulus–Organism–Response), confirm that perceived creativity is a key feature of Instagram. Positive emotions and affective commitment act as partial mediators in the relationship between perceived creativity and interaction intentions (Casaló et al., 2021, pp. 416–425). Other research explores the interactions between informative and trend-driven social media marketing (SMM) activities and customer brand engagement (CBE) and brand loyalty, as well as the moderating effect of age on these relationships. The results suggest that the strength and significance of interactive and trend-based activities on social media vary across age groups (Hazzam, 2022, pp. 197–212).

Looking at social media from the perspective of Generation Z—and recognizing its significant impact on this cohort—one can observe a transformation in how they interact with various public figures and performers, while also opening new opportunities for creative expression and participation. The influence of celebrities, opinion leaders, friends, and peers via social media—particularly in the luxury fashion consumption of Generation Z—was statistically significant. TikTok as a platform changes how Generation Z experiences and participates in theater, dance, and art, lowering entry barriers into these spheres. Meanwhile, Instagram remains highly popular among consumers and followers of celebrities and opinion leaders, fostering luxury fashion consumption among Generation Z. Smartphones have enabled users to create content easily, making them not only passive observers but also active participants (Cervi, 2021, pp. 198–204; Lina et al., 2022, p. 951249; Sun et al., 2022, pp. 603–621; Hazari & Sethna, 2023, pp. 491–534).

However, intensive use of social media for information does not necessarily translate into trust in that information. A study conducted among Generation Z in Spain highlights this paradox. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the content most frequently consumed by Generation Z has included politics, entertainment, humor, and music. However, a clear distrust of politicians, media, and journalists remains, pointing to the continued need for media literacy education, with the added challenge of addressing distrust itself (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021, p.

24). The intensification of social media use has also fueled the rapid growth of online shopping, offering e-retailers opportunities to deliver a wider range of goods more efficiently than traditional players. In this context, various studies focus on Generation Z online shoppers, often employing Generation Cohort Theory (GCT) to provide e-retailers with a framework for better understanding how this generation approaches online purchasing (Thangavel et al., 2022, pp. 710–728). On the other hand, Generation Z's use of social media can also be analyzed in terms of how digital and social media platforms foster boycotting and buycotting as forms of political consumerism. Interest in ethical and political consumption among Generation Z is closely tied to consumerism, but it also varies across societies, cultures, and political communities (Seyfi et al., 2022, pp. 2441–2459).

Research also confirms that social media marketing activities such as entertainment, trend orientation, interaction, and word-of-mouth are relevant for younger cohorts and influence their consumer behaviour across sectors (Hysa et al., 2021, p. 1018; Liu et al., 2023, pp. 1140–1158; Goldring & Azab, 2021, pp. 884–897). In this study, these findings are used primarily to explain how digital platforms shape Generation Z's consumer choices and sustainability-related engagement. Some studies show that only a small proportion of consumers are willing to pay more for green, sustainable products (Groening et al., 2018, pp. 1848–1866), although other research points to the opposite (Su et al., 2019, p. 3607). A study examining factors that significantly affect sustainable consumer behaviour among Generation Z confirms a positive relationship between sustainable behavior, their engagement in environmental protection, and the satisfaction derived from it. At the same time, the findings indicate no relationship between sustainable behavior, green marketing practices of organizations, environmental issues, and Generation Z's self-identification as environmentally responsible consumers, highlighting the need for further investigation (Dragolea et al., 2023, p. 1096183).

Among members of Generation Z, there is a clear interest in greater social engagement, but also a noticeable disorientation regarding concrete action. They express openness toward water and energy conservation, waste separation, avoidance of plastics, reducing food

waste, volunteering, and humanitarian work, as well as abstaining from Sunday shopping. However, it is telling that these values are not consistently or systematically applied in everyday life. This gap can partly be attributed to their socialization within a culture of consumerism, which complicates the implementation of such principles in practice (Brstilo Lovrić, 2023, pp. 153–167). Likewise, celebrities—such as vegan public figures—exert social influence on consumer attitudes toward veganism, shaping intentions to adopt a vegan lifestyle (Phua et al., 2020, pp. 813–835).

GENERATION Z AND SUSTAINABILITY ADVOCACY

Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) is increasingly practiced by companies, particularly in their relations with consumers, as a response to growing pressures in this area. Research on this topic is rapidly accumulating, and findings highlight the critical need to understand CSA from the audience's perspective, informing message design and testing guided by audience-centered models. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of studies focusing exclusively on Generation Z in this context. Addressing this gap is the aim of a group of authors whose study shows that Generation Z stakeholders firmly believe that companies have a responsibility to engage with issues that may be controversial, and that for them, companies are accountable for addressing such problems. They perceive that businesses must take on many of the duties traditionally associated with governmental actors and institutions — undertaking actions historically located in the realm of public policy. This perspective is closely tied to the declining trust of young people in governments, regulatory bodies, and other actors traditionally seen as trustworthy. Their central argument, underpinning all these expectations, is not only about responsibility but also about the possession of money and power (Coman et al., 2022, p. 4099).

An integral part of corporate social advocacy is transparency, which affects stakeholder trust, influences policy-making, and enables improved communication among stakeholders, thereby fostering accountability and trust. The growing trend of applying principles of corporate social responsibility in business practices has been reco-

gnized by Generation Z as a positive development (Bushman & Smith, 2003; Krneta & Ružić, 2023, pp. 1–14).

Exposure to sustainability-related content on social media influences sustainable habits and consumption behavior. These factors can therefore be classified as antecedents that shape the inclination to promote sustainability issues on social networks. Generation Z is considered particularly sensitive to environmental and social responsibility issues, while exposure to such content on social media is seen as a stimulus that fosters the development of sustainability advocacy among Generation Z and mitigates environmental consequences arising from traditional behaviors (Confetto et al., 2023, pp. 758–774; Ling et al., 2024, pp. 507–527).

GENDER DIFFERENCES

In a study examining sustainability advocacy among Italian Generation Z, it was observed that the majority of responses came from a subsample at the University of Salerno. In 2021, 55.5% of students at this university were female, which may connect the research results more closely with female respondents. These findings point to the need for further research into gender differences in sustainability advocacy (Confetto et al., 2023, pp. 758–774). A gender-sensitive approach is also considered important in the context of sustainability transitions. A review of scholarly work published between 2010 and 2020 identified a gap in this area, as gender was rarely addressed or conceptualized in transition research, despite findings highlighting the importance of considering gender when seeking to understand and influence such transitions (Wolfram & Kienesberger, 2023, p. 100686). Research aimed at identifying new ways of influencing female Generation Z consumers' behavior in their interactions with different technologies concludes that increased interaction positively affects their body image, self-confidence, and actual purchasing behavior. Furthermore, addictive use of social media had no significant effects, although trust in celebrities on social media positively influenced women's body image and self-confidence, while the use of chatbots as a form of support significantly shaped user experience.

Brand attachment, reputation, and awareness show no significant effects, but the study of these factors provides important implications for theory and practice concern-

ing the behavior of female Generation Z consumers in interactions with various technologies (Ameen et al., 2022, pp. 2110–2129). Other research has confirmed that Instagram is the medium with the greatest influence on impulsive purchases in the fashion industry, mainly due to the importance of the visual aspect in fashion promotion (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018, pp. 42–62). This platform demonstrates a strong capacity to shape impulsive buying behavior, especially among women (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021, p. 102345). When it comes to gender differences in the use of social media—in the relationships between purchase intentions and advertiser-generated content, purchase recommendations, and the sharing of buying experiences—female members of Generation Z outperform their male counterparts. Women are more likely to exchange information, recommend products, or purchase items through social media, as these platforms are viewed both as useful advertising tools and as potential points of sale. However, when it comes to the need for variety, no gender differences are observed (Workman et al., 2022, pp. 110–118; Matić Šošić, 2024, pp. 1–12). Comparing Generations Z (“Zers”) and X (“Xers”), another group of authors analyzed intergenerational differences in the context of sustainability. The results indicate greater sustainability in purchases made through social networks (greater importance of social labels; higher likelihood of purchase). At the same time, gender does not influence price sensitivity or preference based on social labels (Brand et al., 2022, p. 5689).

Taken together, these findings point to the need for further research focused on gender differences, the role of social media, and the impact of consumerist patterns on sustainability advocacy among Generation Z. Women tend to use social media more often to promote and share sustainable practices, yet gender differences in certain aspects of consumerism and sustainability remain underexplored. From this emerges the central research question: Are female members of Generation Z more inclined to advocate for sustainability compared to their male counterparts?

Alongside this central question, two additional ones are posed: (1) What is the impact of social media on the level of sustainability advocacy among women in Generation Z? (2) To what extent do consumerist behavioral patterns influence attitudes toward sustainability? These questions further direct the research toward gender differences, the

influence of digital platforms, and consumerist practices, offering insights into the specific characteristics of Generation Z in the context of sustainability advocacy.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study examines gender differences in sustainability advocacy among members of Generation Z in Croatia, with particular attention to the role of social media, conscious consumerism, and sustainable product choice. The research design is quantitative and cross-sectional. It is based on an online survey measuring respondents' exposure to sustainability-related content on social media, the perceived influence of such content on behaviour, sustainable product choices, and participation in sustainability initiatives.

The research problem is positioned at the intersection of media and communication studies, sustainability communication, and consumer culture. In this context, social media are treated not only as information channels but also as spaces in which young people encounter, interpret, and potentially translate sustainability messages into everyday behavioural choices.

SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

The target population consisted of members of Generation Z aged 16 to 27. The online survey was distributed via posts on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, as well as by email invitations to members of Generation Z residing in Zagreb, Rijeka, and Split. Data were collected using the Qualtrics online tool between 18 November and 21 December 2024. On average, the respondents required approximately 8 minutes and 30 seconds to complete the questionnaire.

After the data-quality check and the conversion of valid item-level responses into numerical values, the analytical sample varied across statistical procedures because missing values were excluded only from the specific analysis in which they occurred. For H1, the valid response counts were 295 for SocialMediaImpact and 292 for SustainableProducts. For H2, after removing missing responses and retaining the binary gender coding required for moderation analysis, 286 observations were inclu-

ded in the moderated regression model, consisting of 176 responses coded as female and 110 responses coded as male. Small gender categories outside the female/male comparison were retained descriptively where reported but were not used for inferential gender comparisons.

Regarding respondents' status, 69 were still in secondary school, 56 were university students, and 26 were employed. In terms of educational attainment, 89 participants had completed secondary education, 27 an undergraduate degree, and 30 a graduate degree; five respondents did not provide a complete answer to this item. Social media was reported as the primary source of information about sustainability by 112 respondents, followed by personal discussions with friends or family.

The majority of respondents reported reading sustainability-related content on social media rarely or occasionally. At the same time, most respondents considered their own role in sustainability advocacy important or crucial, which indicates a gap between declared sustainability orientation and the intensity of everyday exposure to sustainability-related content. Trust in sustainability information on social media was mostly moderate, suggesting that Generation Z uses social media extensively while remaining selective and cautious toward sustainability claims communicated through these channels.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) Are female members of Generation Z more inclined to advocate for sustainability compared to male members? (2) What is the impact of social media on the level of sustainability advocacy among women in Generation Z? (3) To what extent does sustainable product choice, as a form of conscious consumerism, influence attitudes and behaviours related to sustainability?

HYPOTHESES

Based on the literature review and the stated research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed: H1: Female members of Generation Z demonstrate a higher level of sustainability advocacy than their male counterparts. H2: Social media significantly influence sustainability-related attitudes and behaviours, particularly among women. H3: Sustainable product choice, as an expressi-

on of conscious consumerism, acts as a mediator between exposure to social media and sustainability advocacy.

MEASUREMENT AND INSTRUMENTATION

The variables were operationalized using a five-point Likert scale. Higher values indicate a stronger perceived impact of sustainability-related social media content, more frequent sustainable product choices, or more active participation in sustainability initiatives. The decision to apply a five-point scale was based on methodological recommendations emphasizing its clarity for respondents and its frequent use in studies of attitudes and generational characteristics (Joshi et al., 2015).

The operationalization of the key variables was based on the following logic. SocialMediaImpact (SMI) refers to the perceived extent to which sustainability-related social media content encourages respondents to change their behaviour. SustainableProducts (SP) refers to the frequency of choosing products based on sustainability criteria and is treated as an indicator of sustainable product choice, that is, conscious consumerism. SustainabilityInitiatives (SI) refers to participation in sustainability-related practices such as recycling, waste reduction, and similar everyday initiatives. Gender was used as a grouping and moderating variable and was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female for inferential analyses.

Because the central variables used in the inferential analyses were operationalized as single-item indicators rather than multi-item composite scales, internal consistency coefficients such as Cronbach's alpha were not calculated for these specific variables. No composite indices were formed for SMI, SP, or SI in the inferential models. This should be considered when interpreting the results, since the findings reflect reported perceptions and behavioural tendencies measured through individual indicators rather than latent constructs measured by multi-item scales.

The survey instrument was adapted from established research on sustainability and generational attitudes (Bencsik & Machová, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2018), with statements tailored to the Croatian context and focused on

gender differences in sustainability perceptions. Prior to distribution, a pilot test with five respondents from different age groups ($n = 5$) was conducted to confirm the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Three analytical procedures were applied. H1 was tested using descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test because the key variables were measured on ordinal Likert-type scales and because the gender subsamples were unequal in size. H2 was tested using moderated regression analysis in which gender was examined as a moderator of the relationship between perceived social media impact and sustainable product choice. H3 was tested using regression-based mediation logic (Baron & Kenny, 1986), examining whether sustainable product choice, as an indicator of conscious consumerism, explains part of the relationship between social media impact and participation in sustainability initiatives.

For all analyses, statistical significance was assessed at the conventional $p < 0.05$ level. Exact p-values smaller than 0.001 are reported as $p < 0.001$ to avoid over-precision. The analytical sample is clearly indicated for each test, and cases with missing values were excluded only from the specific analysis in which the missing value occurred. Since the mediation model is based on cross-sectional survey data, the results are interpreted as evidence of statistically significant associations and partial mediation, not as evidence of causality.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DATA TRANSPARENCY

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire, and continuing to the survey was treated as informed consent to participate. No personally identifiable information was collected, and the data were analysed only in aggregated form. Respondents could discontinue participation at any point before submitting the questionnaire. The questionnaire did not include sensitive questions beyond standard demographic variables and did not collect contact

information, IP addresses, or other direct identifiers. For this reason, the ethical risk was assessed as minimal.

LIMITATIONS

The main methodological limitation arises from the use of a non-probability convenience sample, which prevents direct generalization of the results to the wider population of Generation Z in Croatia with a known margin of error. In addition, the gender structure of the sample is uneven, with female respondents being substantially more represented than male respondents. The variables used in the key analyses are based on self-reported Likert-type responses and several of them are single-item indicators; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as reported perceptions and behavioural tendencies rather than as direct observations of behaviour or fully validated latent constructs. Since the survey included respondents aged 16 to 27, future studies should also consider more formal age-specific ethical procedures and sampling controls when minors are included. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions; it identifies statistically significant associations that

should be further tested in future research using larger, more balanced, longitudinal or experimental designs.

RESULTS

H1: Female members of Generation Z demonstrate a higher level of sustainability advocacy than male members.

For testing H1, the following variables were used: Gender (G), Impact of Sustainability-Related Content on Social Media (SocialMediaImpact, SMI), and Product Choice Based on Sustainability (SustainableProducts, SP). First, all responses were converted into numerical values according to a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all / Never ... 5 = Very much / Always). For the variable SustainableProducts, three responses with missing values were excluded. For both variables, descriptive statistics were calculated by gender: Count (N), Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), Minimum (Min), Maximum (Max), and Median (Mdn). The results for each variable are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics by Gender for the Variable SocialMediaImpact (SMI)

Gender	Count	Mean	Std	Min	Max	Median
Female	198	2.64	0.79	1	5	3.0
Male	91	2.19	0.91	1	5	2.0
Binary	3	3.67	2.31	1	5	5.0
I prefer not to answer	3	1.15	1.15	1	3	3.0

Source: Authors' survey, 2024.

Key values from Table 1 indicate that women (N = 198; M = 2.64; Mdn = 3.0) are typically classified as showing a moderate level of sustainability-related advocacy or engagement, while men (N = 91; M = 2.19; Mdn = 2.0) are closer to low levels of engagement. The range for both

groups was 1-5, yet the higher median among women suggests stronger engagement with sustainability-related content. The very small groups for Binary (N = 3) and Prefer not to answer (N = 3) are not statistically reliable for drawing conclusions.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics by Gender for the Variable SustainableProducts (SP)

Gender	Count	Mean	Std	Min	Max	Median
Female	197	2.79	0.89	1	5	3.0
Male	89	2.30	1.04	1	5	2.0
Binary	3	2.33	0.58	2	3	2.0
I prefer not to answer	3	2.67	1.53	1	4	3.0

Source: Authors' survey, 2024.

Key values from Table 2 indicate that women ($N = 197$; $M = 2.79$; $Mdn = 3.0$) typically responded closer to “sometimes”, while men ($N = 89$; $M = 2.30$; $Mdn = 2.0$) were closer to “rarely”. The median was again higher for women. Descriptive statistics revealed gender differences in behaviour change and sustainable product choice. Sustainability-related content on social media and conscious consumerism appear to encourage behavioural change among female members of Generation Z, who more frequently choose products based on sustainability compared to male respondents.

To verify the statistical significance of these observed differences, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted. For the variable “To what extent do sustainability-related social media contents encourage you to change your behavior?”, the test yielded $U = 6326.5$, $p = 1.3215 \times 10^{-5}$ ($p < 0.001$). A statistically significant difference was found between genders, with women reporting higher levels of behaviour change encouraged by sustainability-related content than men. For the variable “How often do you choose products based on their sustainability?”, the test yielded $U = 6361.5$, $p = 9.6187 \times 10^{-5}$ ($p < 0.001$). A statistically significant difference was observed, with women more frequently choosing sustainable products than men.

The test results indicate that female members of Generation Z demonstrate a higher level of sustainability advocacy than their male counterparts, thereby confirming H1. Women more strongly expressed that sustainability-related content on social media encourages them to change their behaviour, and they more frequently reported

choosing products based on sustainability criteria. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that women often report higher environmental awareness and a stronger willingness to engage in sustainable behaviour (Zelezny et al., 2000; Xiao & McCright, 2015). Feminist environmental theories often emphasize that women develop a stronger sense of empathy toward nature and community, which may partly explain their greater involvement in sustainable practices (Zelezny et al., 2000).

H2: Social media have a significant influence on sustainability-related attitudes and behaviours, particularly among women.

For testing H2, a moderated regression analysis was conducted to examine the role of gender as a potential moderator of the relationship between the perceived impact of social media and respondents’ sustainable behaviour. SustainableProducts was used as the dependent variable, SocialMediaImpact as the independent variable, and gender as the moderator. Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female, while other response categories were excluded due to the small number of cases and for methodological consistency. After converting the data into numerical values according to the Likert scale and removing missing data and responses, 286 observations were included in the analysis, consisting of 176 responses coded as female and 110 responses coded as male. The moderated regression analysis was conducted using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method and included the main effect of SocialMediaImpact, the main effect of gender, and the interaction effect (SMI x Gender).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics by Gender for the Variable SocialMediaImpact (SMI)

	Predictor	Coef.(B)	Std.error	t-value	p-value
1	Intercept	1.204	0.245	4.905	<0.001
2	SocialMediaImpact	0.497	0.103	4.829	<0.001
3	Gender	0.505	0.326	1.547	0.123
4	Interaction (SMI*G)	-0.087	0.129	-0.676	0.500

Source: Authors’ survey, 2024.

The results in Table 3 show that SocialMediaImpact has a positive and statistically significant effect on sustainable product choice ($B = 0.497$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that respondents who perceive sustainability-related

social media content as more influential are also more likely to report choosing products based on sustainability criteria. The main effect of gender was not statistically significant ($B = 0.505$, $p = 0.123$), and the intera-

ction between SocialMediaImpact and gender was also not significant ($B = -0.087$, $p = 0.500$). The non-significant interaction is particularly important for interpreting H2: although women reported higher sustainability-related engagement descriptively, the strength of the relationship between social media impact and sustainable product choice did not significantly differ by gender.

The results of the moderated regression analysis indicate that SocialMediaImpact has a highly significant and positive effect on SustainableProducts ($B = 0.497$, $p < 0.001$). The main effect of gender is not statistically significant on its own ($B = 0.505$, $p = 0.123$), while the interaction between SocialMediaImpact and gender is also not significant ($B = -0.087$, $p = 0.500$). These findings suggest that social media have a strong and positive impact on sustainable behaviour across all respondents. Although women reported slightly higher levels of sustainable behaviour than men, gender does not significantly alter the relationship between social media impact and sustainable behaviour. Therefore, H2 was not confirmed.

This interpretation is consistent with generational value theory (Inglehart, 1997) and with recent studies emphasizing the role of digital environments in shaping shared norms among younger cohorts (Tirocchi, 2024; Wang & Wu, 2024; Pompurová et al., 2025). While H1 shows

that women report higher levels of sustainability advocacy, H2 shows that the relationship between social media influence and sustainable behaviour is not significantly conditioned by gender.

H3: Sustainable product choice, as an expression of conscious consumerism, acts as a mediator between exposure to social media and sustainability advocacy.

For testing H3, SocialMediaImpact was used as the independent variable, SustainableProducts as the mediator, and SustainabilityInitiatives as the dependent variable. SustainableProducts is interpreted as sustainable product choice and as an expression of conscious consumerism, while SustainabilityInitiatives refers to sustainability advocacy measured as participation in initiatives such as recycling, waste reduction, and other sustainability-related activities.

Mediation was tested using a regression-based approach. Model A examined the effect of SocialMediaImpact on SustainableProducts. Model B examined the combined effect of SocialMediaImpact and SustainableProducts on SustainabilityInitiatives. This approach makes it possible to assess whether social media influence is associated with sustainability advocacy both directly and indirectly through sustainable product choice.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis for H3

Model	Dependent Variable	R2	Beta (SocialMedia Impact)	p-value (SocialMedia Impact)	Beta (Sustainable Products)	p-value (Sustainable Products)
Model A	SustainableProducts	0.146	0.432	<0.001	n/a	n/a
Model B	SustainabilityInitiatives	0.157	0.207	0.024	0.329	<0.001

Source: Authors' survey, 2024.

The results presented in Table 4 suggest that conscious consumerism, measured through sustainable product choice, mediates the effect of social media on sustainability advocacy. Greater exposure to sustainability-related content on social media increases sustainable purchasing, which in turn leads to more active participation in sustainability initiatives. Social media also have a direct effect on sustainability advocacy ($\beta = 0.207$, $p = 0.024$), indicating that they promote pro-environmental behaviour independently of consumerism. Although sustainable product choice is a strong mediator in the relationship

between social media and sustainability advocacy ($\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.001$), it is not the only factor in this process.

H3 is therefore confirmed. However, the results should be interpreted as evidence of regression-based partial mediation rather than as proof of causality, given the cross-sectional design of the study. The findings suggest that sustainable product choice can function not only as a consumer behaviour but also as a communication and behavioural bridge: conscious consumption becomes one of the ways through which young people translate susta-

inability messages encountered on social media into everyday practice.

These findings build upon the concept of political consumerism or conscious consumption (Micheletti, 2003), which argues that consumer choices are not merely economic transactions but also a form of political expression. Social media thus perform a dual role: on the one hand, they foster sustainable purchasing habits, and on the other, they inspire broader social engagement through ecological initiatives. Since consumerism is not the sole mediator, processes of engagement may additionally be explained by identity, social norms, or emotional connections with sustainability, in line with theoretical models on the multidimensional nature of environmental behaviour (Stern, 2000).

DISCUSSION

The results contribute to the understanding of how Generation Z in Croatia interprets and practices sustainability in a digital communication environment. H1 confirmed gender differences, showing that women reported higher levels of sustainability advocacy than men. This finding is consistent with earlier research on gender and environmental concern, which often identifies women as more likely to express pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Zelezny et al., 2000; Xiao & McCright, 2015; Li et al., 2022).

At the same time, H2 was not confirmed, which adds nuance to the interpretation of gender differences. Although women reported higher levels of sustainability-related engagement, gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between social media impact and sustainable behaviour. This means that social media influence is not limited to women but operates across gender groups. The result points to sustainability as a transversal generational value: a value increasingly shaped in shared digital spaces rather than only through traditional gendered patterns of socialization.

H3 further shows that sustainable consumption is an important pathway through which social media content is linked to sustainability advocacy. This finding also highlights a central tension of the study: the same digital environments that promote sustainability also intensify consumerist pressures, trends, and brand-driven messa-

ges. For Generation Z, sustainability advocacy therefore develops within a contradictory communication space in which ethical values and market logics coexist. This is particularly relevant for public relations and sustainability communication because it suggests that messages about sustainability should not be designed only as awareness campaigns. They should help young audiences distinguish credible sustainability claims from symbolic or promotional messages and connect values, everyday choices, and visible forms of participation.

From a practical communication perspective, the findings suggest that institutions, organizations, and public campaigns should use digital channels preferred by Generation Z and design messages that are credible, concrete, and participatory. Campaigns aimed at women may emphasize collective action, empathy, and social responsibility, while campaigns aimed at men may additionally highlight innovation, technological solutions, and individual contribution. However, because the social media effect was not significantly moderated by gender, communication strategies should avoid rigid gender stereotypes and instead combine inclusive generational messaging with optional audience-specific framing.

The study also has implications for public relations practice. Sustainability advocacy among Generation Z cannot be reduced to communication exposure alone. It depends on the credibility of the message, the perceived relevance of sustainable choices, and the possibility of translating values into action. In this sense, sustainability communication should move beyond symbolic claims and provide young audiences with transparent, actionable, and trustworthy information.

CONCLUSION

This study examined gender differences in sustainability advocacy among Generation Z in Croatia, focusing on the role of social media and consumerist behaviour. The results confirmed H1, showing that female respondents demonstrate higher levels of sustainability advocacy than male respondents. Women reported a stronger perceived influence of sustainability-related social media content and more frequent sustainable product choices.

H2 was not confirmed. Although social media significantly influence sustainability-related behaviour, this

influence was not significantly stronger among women. Instead, the results suggest that social media contribute to the formation of sustainability as a shared generational value. H3 was confirmed, showing that sustainable product choice partially mediates the relationship between social media impact and participation in sustainability initiatives.

The study contributes to media and communication research by showing that sustainability advocacy among Generation Z emerges from the interaction between digital communication, consumer culture, and generatio-

nal values. It also contributes to public relations practice by emphasizing the need for credible, participatory, and carefully framed sustainability communication. At the same time, the conclusions should be read in light of the non-probability sample, the uneven gender structure, and the use of single-item indicators. Future research should expand the sample, include more balanced gender groups, examine additional mediators such as trust and identity, and apply longitudinal or experimental designs to test causal relationships more precisely.

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GENERACIJA Z I RODNE RAZLIKE U ZAGOVARANJU ODRŽIVOSTI: UTJECAJ DRUŠTVA I KONZUMERIZMA

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SAŽETAK: Generacija Z, društveni mediji, svjesni konzumerizam i održivost sve su više međusobno povezani, pri čemu se mladi pozicioniraju kao važni sudionici okolišnih i društvenih promjena. Ovaj rad istražuje rodne razlike unutar generacije Z u zagovaranju održivosti u Hrvatskoj, s naglaskom na utjecaj društvenih medija i održivi izbor proizvoda kao izraz svjesnog konzumerizma. Analiza se temeljila na valjanim odgovorima na razini pojedinih čestica, pri čemu se analitički uzorak razlikovao ovisno o primijenjenom statističkom postupku: 295 valjanih odgovora za percipirani utjecaj društvenih medija, 292 za održivi izbor proizvoda te 286 opažanja u modelu moderacijske regresije. Za testiranje triju hipoteza korištene su deskriptivna statistika, Mann–Whitneyjev U test, moderacijska regresija i regresijski utemeljena medijacijska analiza. Rezultati potvrđuju da žene iskazuju višu razinu zagovaranja održivosti (H1) te da održivi izbor proizvoda djelomično posreduje u odnosu između utjecaja društvenih medija i sudjelovanja u održivim inicijativama (H3). Istodobno, društveni mediji značajno utječu na stavove i ponašanja povezana s održivošću neovisno o spolu, što dovodi do odbacivanja H2.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: društveni mediji, generacija Z, ponašanje potrošača, rodne razlike, zagovaranje održivosti.
