

# Exploring the role of social media in shaping young consumers sustainable consumption behaviour

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate the role of social media in shaping young consumers attitude and behaviour towards sustainable consumption. The methodology is quantitative and descriptive, based on an online survey of 319 respondents. The results show that generation Y and generation Z care about the environment and are willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly products, particularly regarding their purchase of clothing and fashion, foodstuffs, and personal care products. The results are relevant for marketers to implement better communication strategies using social media to increase young consumers' purchases of sustainable products.

**Keywords:** Sustainable consumptions; social media; Generation Z; Generation Y

## 1. Introduction and research questions

Individual consumption behaviour has significantly negative effect on the environment (Sun & Wang, 2019). Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of environmental challenges, and consequently sustainability has become a key consideration for a variety of consumer segments when making their purchase decisions (Gazzola et al., 2020). According to a consumer report conducted by Nielsen in 2015 (Nielsen, 2015), 66 percent of the consumers were willing to pay extra for sustainable goods, and this trend was even stronger for the younger segments, specifically generation Y (73 per cent) and generation Z (72 per cent). Additionally, more than 70 per cent of those two segments was found to be engaged in social media platforms daily (Nielsen, 2015). Based on those trends, and the fact that generation Y and generation Z constitutes large populations of tomorrows' consumers our study will focus on the following research questions.

1. What is young consumers' attitude towards and knowledge of sustainable consumption and what is social media's role in this regard compared to other sources?
2. To what extent do young consumers include sustainability issues in their choice of alternatives across different products?
3. What is young consumers' social media usage and to what extent they are exposed to sustainable issues when using social media?
4. To what extent are young consumers' exposure to sustainable content on social media related to their considerations regarding sustainability when purchasing different products.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a brief literature review. Section 3 presents the research methods. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis and followed by a discussion of the findings in Section 5. Section 6 concludes with a summary of the major conclusions and managerial implications.

## **2.Litterature review**

Social media plays an important role in shaping consumers attitudes and purchase intention toward sustainable products (Zao *et al.*, 2019), and therefore marketers are seeking increased presence across various social media (Bedrad and Tolmie, 2018). Our review of existing research on sustainable consumption revealed very broad range of product types being studied, yet the most commonly products included were foodstuffs, clothing and fashion, mobile phone, electronics other than mobile phones, personal care products, interior design, mode of transport in connection with travel, and accommodation in connection with travel. Most studies only include a single specific product type (i.e., mobile phones), which makes comparisons across product types difficult. The empirical evidence studying the relationship between generations and sustainability suggest that younger generations are inclined of being more sustainable consumers (Gurau, 2012). Yet, some research has shown a weak relationship between consumers' proneness to sustainability and their actual behaviour.

## **3. Method**

### *3.1 Survey instrument*

The questionnaire consists of four major sections, where section one deals with the demographic profile of the respondents such as gender, age, education-level and income, and income. Section two dealt with young consumers knowledge of and attitudes towards environmental and sustainable consumption. Section three deals with young people's consumption of social media and the extent to which they come across content related to sustainable consumption across selected product categories. In the fourth section respondents are asked to indicate to what extent the content on social media influences their considerations about buying sustainably within the selected product categories. Eight goods and service categories were selected for inclusion in the study: Foodstuffs, clothing and fashion, mobile phone, electronics other than mobile phones, personal care products, interior design, mode of transport in connection with travel, and accommodation in connection with travel. The products were chosen with the intention to include goods and services used by the younger consumers on a regular basis and to cover a wide range of different product characteristics

(i.e. durables vs. nondurables, expensive vs. non-expensive products) expected to be associated young consumers' attitude and behaviour towards sustainable consumption.

### 3.2 Data collection and sample

Data was collected through convenience sampling, checking only for year of birth (the respondents had to be born between 1980 and 2010 to match the Gen Y and Gen Z segments). Invitations to participate in the study were disseminated by asking all undergraduate students in a media-research class on University of Southern Denmark to share a link to the online survey via mail and through their social media platforms. After eliminating non-completed questionnaires and respondents not born between 1980 and 2010, a total of 319 cases were available for further analysis. The sample is skewed toward women respondents (68.7 per cent of the total sample). Most of our participants are students (60.8 per cent) and in the 15-24 years range (53.9 per cent), reflecting the fact that links to our questionnaire were distributed by first year's university students on their social media sites. Consequently, Gen Z is also overrepresented (68 per cent compared to 38 per cent of Gen Y) and the sample is skewed toward lower income (46.2 percent below 100.000 DDK).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Attitude towards and knowledge of sustainable consumption

Table 1 displays young consumers' attitude towards four statements reflecting *environmental concern, willingness to pay extra for environmentally friendly products, climate scepticism, and perceived consumer efficiency*. The proportion of consumers who agree or totally agree with the first two statements (77.4 per cent and 53.3 per cent, respectively) show that they care about the environment and are willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly products. Similarly, the proportion who disagree or totally disagree with the last two statements (84.6 per cent and 72.4 per cent, respectively) shows that young consumers believe in climate change and believe that the individual consumer's sustainable choices can make a difference.

**Table 1 To what extent do you agree with the below-mentioned statements about sustainability?**  
(N=319)

	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither/ or	Agree	Totally agree
	%				
I am concerned about the environment	1.9	2.8	17.9	<b>40.1</b>	<b>37.3</b>
I am willing to pay a little extra for a product/service that is more environmentally friendly than the cheaper alternative	6.9	12.5	27.3	<b>39.5</b>	<b>13.8</b>
I am unsure if climate change is really happening	<b>70.2</b>	<b>14.4</b>	6.0	4.1	5.3
Since one person alone cannot have any impact on pollution and natural resource problems, it makes no difference what I buy or consume	<b>38.2</b>	<b>34.2</b>	19.7	5.3	2.5

Table 2 shows that young consumers perceive themselves as knowing about sustainable consumption. 54.2 per cent say, that they have some knowledge, 22.9 per cent and 3.1 per cent say that they have much or very much knowledge, respectively.

**Table 2 How would you describe your knowledge of sustainable consumption? (N=319)**

	%
Has basically no knowledge about sustainable consumption	2.8
Knows a little about sustainable consumption	16.9
Knows something about sustainable consumption	54.2
Knows much about sustainable consumption	22.9
Knows very much about sustainable consumption	3.1

Table 3 displays from which sources the young consumers believe that they have gained their knowledge about sustainable consumption. Figures in the first column, show that other websites than social media are seen as the far most influential source (M=3.32, SD=1.19), followed by friends and family and TV as number two and three (M=2.74, SD=.95; M=2.67, SD=1.00). Interestingly, corporate advertisements on social media are on the same level (M=2.49, SD=1.04) as friends and acquaintances' social media posts (M=2.47, SD=1.03) and both sources are seen as more influential than social media influencers (M=2.21, SD=1.10). The mean values in the third and fifth columns show young consumers' trust in and use of information from the sources. The mean values follow roughly the same order as in the first column, but interestingly there is less confidence in the advertising from companies compared to posts from friends and acquaintances (M=2.29 M=2.49, respectively).

**Table 3 Sources of knowledge about sustainable consumption (N=319)**

Sources	<i>Mean</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>SD</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Mean</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Mean</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>SD</i> <sup>3</sup>
Other websites than social media	<b>3.32</b>	1.19	<b>3.33</b>	.97	<b>3.30</b>	1.02
Friends and family	<b>2.74</b>	.95	<b>2.97</b>	.75	<b>2.82</b>	.93
TV	<b>2.67</b>	1.00	<b>3.33</b>	.97	<b>2.84</b>	1.02
The companies' advertising on social media	2.49	1.04	2.29	.86	2.19	.94
Friends/acquaintances or others on social media	2.47	1.03	2.49	.83	2.44	.97
Social media influencers	2.21	1.10	2.04	.90	2.06	1.00
Magazines and weeklies	1.66	.85	2.63	.97	2.09	1.00

1. To what extent do you have your knowledge of sustainable consumption from ...
2. To what extent do you trust information on sustainable consumption from...
3. Have you used or will you use information about sustainable consumption from...

Scale: 1= Not at all, 2=To a minor degree, 3=To some degree, 4=To a high degree, and 5=To a very high degree

#### 4.2 Young consumers social media usage and exposure to sustainability related content

Table 4 confirms that young consumers are heavy users of social media. Approximately 95 per cent of the young consumers spend at least one hour daily on social media, and nearly half (48.3 per cent) spend three hours or more.

**Table 4 How much time do you spend daily on social media? (N=319)**

	%
Less than an hour	4.7
1-3 hours	48.0
3-5 hours	35.7
More than 5 hours	12.6

The first column of Table 5 shows, for each of eight product categories, how often young consumers are exposed to sustainable content on social media. Clothing, foodstuffs, personal care products, and mode of transport in connection with travel are, in that order, the product categories where young people are most often exposed to content related to sustainability (M=3.18, DV 1.16; M=3.03, DV 1.09; M=2.91, DV=1.26; M=2.65, DV=1.14). Interior design, mobile phone, electronics other than mobile phones, and accommodation in connection with travel are the product categories where young people are least exposed to sustainability-related content.

**Table 5 Sustainable content on social media and its relationship with sustainability in purchases. (N=319)**

Product /services	<i>Mean</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>SD</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Mean</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Mean</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>SD</i> <sup>3</sup>
Clothing and fashion	3.18	1.16	3.19	1.07	2.58	1.10
Foodstuffs	3.03	1.09	2.78	1.18	2.14	1.10
Personal care products	2.91	1.26	2.75	1.11	2.65	1.13
Mode of transport in connection with travel	2.65	1.14	2.73	1.25	2.40	1.27
Interior design	2.13	1.01	2.41	1.13	1.96	1.06
Mobile phone	1.76	.95	1.97	1.03	1.59	.92
Electronics other than mobile phones	1.72	.91	1.95	1.03	1.53	.88
Accommodation in connection with travel	1.62	.83	1.86	.97	1.64	.95

1. When you are on social media, how often do you come across content that deals with sustainability within....
2. To what extent do you consider sustainable when you buy....
3. To what extent has the content on social media influenced your considerations about being sustainable within...

Scale (first column): 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, and 5=Very often

Scale (third and fifth column): 1= Not at all, 2=To a minor degree, 3=To some degree, 4=To a high degree, and 5=To a very high degree

### 4.3 Influence of sustainability-related content on young consumers' sustainable consumption

The mean values in the third column of Table 5 reflect, for each of eight product categories, to what extent young consumers consider sustainability when purchasing the product. The mean values follow roughly the same order as in the first column. The fifth column in Table 6 displays young consumers' own perception of how much sustainability-related content influence their purchases of the respective products. The mean values follow roughly the same order as in the first and third column, but interestingly the influence of social media content seems to be relatively low when purchasing foodstuffs.

To support the self-reported influence of social media content on young consumers purchase decisions we performed two series of bivariate correlations using considerations of sustainability in purchase decisions as the one variable in both series, and exposure to sustainability related content on social media and the self-reported influence of social media content respectively as the second variable in each of the two series. Table 6 displays Spearman's rank correlations for the two series in the first and second columns, respectively. The correlations confirm the self-reported influence of sustainable-related content with strong correlations on **all categories except for foodstuffs**.

**Table 6 The relationship between sustainability related content on social media and young consumers' considerations of sustainability across different product types**

on social media influenced your considerations about being sustainable within (N=319)

Product /services	<i>Rho</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Rho</i> <sup>2</sup>
Clothing and fashion	.41**	.56**
Foodstuffs	.28**	.37**
Personal care products	.56**	.75**
Mode of transport in connection with travel	.35**	.42**
Interior design	.43**	.58**
Mobile phone	.34**	.53**
Electronics other than mobile phones	.40**	.67**
Accommodation in connection with travel	.39**	.50**

\*\* p<.001

1. Spearmans rank correlation between “When you are on social media, how often do you come across content that deals with sustainability within...” and “To what extent do you consider sustainable when you buy...”.
2. Spearmans rank correlation between “To what extent has the content on social media influenced your considerations about being sustainable within...”

## 5. Conclusion

The study has both theoretical and managerial implications. To the best of the authors knowledge, empirical research on sustainability that include a variety of products in the same study are limited. Our research therefore brings new opportunities to scholars to compare young consumers' interest in sustainability across different product types. The results confirm

to a large extent that Gen Y and Gen Z are concerned about the environment and willing to pay more for environmental-friendly products. Young consumers believe that they have a fair amount of knowledge about sustainability and that they primarily obtain this knowledge from sources such as the Internet, TV and friends and family. Social media influencers are not seen as having much influence regarding obtaining knowledge about sustainability, and it seems young people have less trust in this source, even when compared to advertising from companies. The results signify that young consumers consider sustainability to a higher degree when purchasing clothing and fashion, foodstuffs, personal care products and chosen mode of transport for travelling when compared to interior design products, mobile phone, electronics other than mobile phone and accommodation in connection with travel. Further research may investigate why this is so.

## Literature

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