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Consumer-Brand Value Alignment: Insights from Gen Z's Purchasing Behaviors in the USA

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This study investigates the growing gap between Generation Z's expressed sustainability values and their actual purchase behavior in the United States. As Generation Z emerges as a dominant consumer cohort, comprehension of the mechanisms that translate environmental awareness into sustainable consumption is essential to advance responsible consumption and support environmental goals. Grounded in social marketing principles and informed by social identity theory and expectancy value theory, the research examines how sustainable product attributes and informed consumer engagement influence purchase behavior. Specifically, it tests how sustainability research activities (an informed behavior) and brand recognition (a marketing cue) interact to shape consumer choices across three product categories: hair care, athletic clothing, and hospitality services. Two hypotheses are tested: first, that consumers with heightened sustainability research activities are more likely to purchase sustainable products; and second, that brand recognition is positively associated with the purchase of sustainable products.

A quantitative social marketing approach is adopted to analyze how behavioral objectives—sustainable purchases—can be promoted through the marketing mix. An online survey distributed via Qualtrics included 49 structured items that measure sustainability perceptions, product-specific attributes, and purchase intentions. The sample comprised 216 United States-based Generation Z respondents. Audience segmentation distinguished eco-activist and moderate subgroups within Generation Z, and the exchange proposition was framed around personal and collective benefits of sustainable choices, such as ethical alignment, environmental protection, and long-term product quality. The study also accounts for rival behaviors such as fast fashion consumption and price-driven decisions. Data were analyzed through Principal Component Analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and hierarchical regression. Validated multi-item scales (Cronbach's alpha = .70–.81) confirmed the reliability of the central constructs, Brands with Sustainable Attributes and Sustainability Research Activities.

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Sustainability research activities significantly predict sustainable purchase behavior, whereas brand recognition does not. Brands with Sustainable Attributes demonstrated significant positive associations with purchases across all three sustainable product categories (standardized regression coefficient $\beta = .27$ to $.43$, $p < .01$), while Sustainability Research Activities yielded mixed or negligible effects ($\beta = -.13$ to $.08$). The hierarchical regression models explained between 9 percent and 18 percent of the variance in sustainable purchase behaviors. These results confirm the first hypothesis and partially reject the second, and indicate that authentic, attribute-based sustainability cues exert a stronger influence on Generation Z purchases than brand familiarity alone.

The study contributes to social marketing theory through the integration of social identity theory and expectancy value theory to explain how shared sustainability values translate into measurable consumer actions among digital natives. It clarifies the relative weight of informational engagement versus brand-driven cues that shape sustainable consumption, and refines knowledge of the attitude-behavior gap. Informed engagement with sustainability content emerges as a stronger psychological driver than brand recognition. The research also reinforces the importance of formative research, theory-driven design, and evaluation as standards for social marketing interventions that target younger consumers. For practitioners, the results indicate that authentic sustainability efforts and educational engagement drive behavioral change more effectively than brand strategies. Marketers and social marketing practitioners are advised to invest in transparent sustainability communication, partnerships with educational and environmental organizations, and data-driven audience segmentation that distinguishes eco-activist from moderate Generation Z subgroups. Communication strategies should emphasize verifiable product attributes, ethical alignment, and long-term value rather than symbolic environmental claims, which can be perceived as greenwash by an audience that actively researches sustainability information. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations and incorporate longitudinal and qualitative designs to evaluate long-term behavior maintenance, while practitioners should adopt evidence-based strategies that foster authentic sustainability engagement over symbolic environmental claims.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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