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Connecting With Gen Z: Digital Strategies for Promoting Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract

This study investigates the connection of Generation Z with sustainable consumption using digital strategies. To be precise, how digital strategies can make Gen Z practice sustainable consumption in their life. Research methodology involves qualitative method where semi-structured interview uses to collect primary data for this study. The results highlights that many people are affected by this digital marketing tactics on behalf of expanding the sustainable practice to Gen Z consumers. Additionally, upon making brighter future, consumers also expecting that sellers should manage the pricing on sustainable products where people commonly found it is pricier than regular items.

Keywords: Digital, gen z, strategies for promoting, sustainable consumption.

1. Introduction

In this rapidly developing world, the balance between progress and preservation is becoming increasingly critical. Conservation, the practice of protecting and preserving natural resources and biodiversity, plays a very important role in achieving a sustainable future. "The world is dying", a phrase we have been using for several years now. This is because of the use of chemicals, unplantable plastic piles and an era of development that is heavily logged and polluted areas are on the rise. Therefore, it is important to take care of the earth and in order to nurture the planet for new generations to survive. Among ways to help protect the planet is to practice sustainability. This is because sustainability is guaranteed as one of the many methods to help keep the world green.

Meanwhile, we are in the digital age, where it has been dominated by Gen Z. Therefore, it is a necessity to let them practice and have great knowledge about this. Furthermore, Gen Z is recognized as a digital intelligence people, so to let them have more responsibility towards keeping the world safe, is the best decision.

Besides, today, consumers slowly begin to show their concern for the environment and choose more eco-friendly products and services. Environmental awareness has created environmentally friendly consumption or commonly called green consumerism. According to Khachatryan et al., (2023), sustainability is defined as consumer preference to promote environmentally friendly products

and services. From that, green consumerism emerges from the awareness of each individual (Rajagopal & Rajagopal, 2021). Due to these things, consumers are motivated to support and change their behavior towards the purchase of sustainable products. According to Osuagwu (2023), environmentally friendly products are products that have benefits related to the reduction of adverse environmental impacts and the creation of positive effects on consumers by increasing concern for the environment.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

This study examines the connection between Generation Z with the world of digital from sustainable practices perspectives. Theory of Planned Behaviour applied to evaluate how Gen Z adopting sustainable in their life and what can we do to enhance the consumption among them (Kara & Min, 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Generation Z

Generation Z is the generation that has being born in year 1996-2009 (Aguas, 2024). They grew up when modern technology began to be revolutionized, updated, developed and applied (Twenge, 2023). In another study, Gaidhani et al (2019) also agreed that Gen Z is the generation that born and raised in the era of technological advancement. Therefore, as a generation of digital natives which have better technological skills, generation Z has a high level of ability and awareness in fending off negative influences that come to them, both from real and digital world, which can harm themselves (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021). Gen Z also prefer to express themselves according to their own desires and expectations, especially for things which are new and challenging (Madden, 2019). As Malaysians, especially university students, generation Z is required to act cautiously, have a high spirit, be visionary in preserving and making Malaysia a country that cares for the environment, thereby helping to save the earth (Xing, 2021).

2.2. Digital Marketing

Among the significant digital strategies including using social media as a medium to market products (Omar et al., 2021). In a recent study by Rachmadewi et al (2021), there is mention of digital marketing strategies where the way to optimize digital marketing is through SEO which is able to increase audience traffic on Instagram and Facebook, Paid Advertising (PPC) which has the potential to target audiences more effectively, Whatsapp Business, coordinating resellers and dropshippers to market products on Whatsapp and the Facebook Business Suite feature which makes it easier for admins to manage accounts well. Following that, website also used as the company's official site as well as the pricing strategy. Therefore, with the right strategy, business can also optimize their online presence to increase sustainable awareness and convert the connection to eco-friendly shopping (Almalki et al., 2023).

2.3. Sustainable Consumption

Generally, the term of sustainability is often used and heard every day. It is a concept and action that fits the social, economic and physical environment (Hariram et al., 2023). The goal of sustainable consumption is a universal agenda to act more aggressively in taking care and nurturing the earth including ensuring that humanity will become more secured and peaceful (Jamil, 2019). According to Biglari et al (2022), the aims of the SDGs in which have 17 goals with 169 targets to be achieved based on the SDGs global model. The SDGs model is an extension

of the Millennium Development Goals (MSDs) model. The practice of sustainability will also help in terms of increasing environmental awareness, public health issues and other economic activities (Khan et al., 2020).

2.4. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) assumes that behavior is always planned (Ajzen, 2020). However, in reality, planning does not necessarily occur. Decision makers or consumers are often seen as individuals with habits. Therefore, the way they choose to make purchases is often done without consideration (Ramya, 2016). Habits will eventually arise from certain behaviors. A study by Verplanken & Aarts (1999) shows that individuals with firm, or discipline habits are less likely to obtain information and investigate different options available to them. To break this habit, there needs to be awareness in dealing with behavior. Therefore, the role of companies or businessmen to market products and to practice sustainability correctly should be highlighted more. This can increase awareness in stimulating changes in the behavior of a consumer.

3. Methodology

To answer the question of how digital strategies help promoting sustainable use by Gen Z can be implemented effectively, a qualitative methodology was used for this study to obtain insights and understandings regarding sustainability by Gen Z in Terengganu. A semi-structured interview method was used to collect primary data for this study. This method was chosen because it can help in collecting data that is not available in library studies in terms of facts, views or attitudes, suggestions, processes, experiences or expectations of the interviewees regarding the research topic (Tracy, 2024). Semi-structured interviews are also seen to provide space for how the interviewees want to answer the questions posed in addition to answering specific questions.

In addition, the interviewees, namely Gen Z students, have a background or specifications similar to the interviewers, which can increase the likelihood of agreement to participate in the interview session. Based on the previous qualitative studies, the principle of data saturation is an important aspect that needs to be taken into account in data collection (Saunders et al., 2018). Data saturation is when the data obtained to a certain extent no longer provides new input regarding the subject under study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Researchers who used the same data collection method have confirmed that 6 interviews out of 11 interviews are where the data from qualitative interviews usually almost reach the data saturation level, where it is said has reached 80% of saturation (Guest et al., 2020). However, the number of interviews required to obtain sufficient data always depends on the type and purpose of the study (Baker & Edward, 2012). For this study, 15 out of 18 participants agreed that it is important to protect the environment to have a bright future, especially for future generations.

Next, interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed to obtain relevant information (Ranney et al., 2015). Qualitative data obtained through in-depths interviews will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Daama et al., 2023). Thematic analysis involves steps such as transcription, coding, theme identification and organizing themes systematically (Christou, 2022). The results of this analysis using NVivo 15 software will provide a deep understanding of the Generation Zs habits on digital that then shape sustainable online shopping decisions. Referring to this study, the researcher used the community population among youth

which is Gen Z aged 12 to 28 years old who are the dividing line between adults and children as the subject of the study. As for the selection of the place, the researcher has chosen universities as places to conduct research and obtain information sources.

4. Results

This section explains the findings of the study based on the study objective. Influence of social media and digital marketing, sustainable products perception and attitudes as well as expectations and preferences in sustainable advertising have been analyzed. There were few questions that were asked to all informants in relation to this objective, namely: (1) How much does social media affect your purchasing decisions online; (2) What made the influencer convincing; (3) How often do you encounter advertising of any kind on social media (4) Do you think environmental concerns and external pressure influence your purchase intention of sustainable products; (5) Do you think it's important for companies to act sustainably and showcase it externally? In what ways should this happen; (6) What comes up in your mind when you hear about the term "Sustainable Fashion"? Do you usually pay attention to this concept; (7) What do you expect from advertising on social media channels to trigger an actual purchase.

4.1. Influence of Social Media and Digital Marketing

To understand the influence of social media and digital marketing, researcher asked the participants if the variety of digital marketing tactics ever impact them as Generation Z, towards eco-friendly behaviour. First, focusing on influencer, social media and advertising, the participants expressed that the digital marketing nowadays are very aggressive. For example, P13 says she encounters lots of advertising while log in to online games or even trying to watch any dramas. In response, she says "So, banyak... kadang-kadang rasa geram bila kena tunggu lama untuk tengok cerita or main game... or what you means adds in Instagram? If like that, banyak but I'm okay". P18 also stated that he had to face advertisement every time he logs in to Instagram, "Banyak jugak doh, literally everytime I open instagram". Meanwhile, on other hand, P8 mentions she always encounter advertisement on social media especially on eco-friendly products such as "Saya agak kerap jumpa iklan di media sosial, terutamanya dari jenama-jenama yang fokus pada alam sekitar. Contohnya, The Body Shop yang selalu promosikan produk kecantikan beretika dan bebas dari bahan kimia. Jenama Hygr pun sama menjual produk lip balm dan deodorant yang betul-betul sustained". Although there is a lot of anger surround us on advertisement, but somehow it let us have insight on what we have missed or slowly forgotten.

In order to dive in more about influencer, researcher asked the participants if they ever convinced by any products that were promotes or sell in any social media platforms such as on TikTok, Instagram or even Facebook. P11 eagerly says she is one of the consumers that easily attracted to interesting content with great reviews. She emphasizes her excitement in the interview, "Disebabkan saya seorang yang mudah teracun, kalau influencer tu buat content yang menarik, dengan bukti nyata yang barang tu bagus, saya akan click buy now right away!". Similarly to P3 thoughts on marketing tactics, she will sprintly invested if the products been promoted excellently. As such, the response was recorded, "Hm saya sejenis yang susah untuk dipengaruhi sebenarnya since I were very rational with my financial (ketawa) but in this case, I will say maybe the way they promote the products? Kalau cara dorang promotes itu convincing, tak

mustahil saya akan terpengaruh juga untuk beli". P4 who a total fanatic of Khairul Aming says, she will absolutely without thinking will buy whatever it is that Khairul Aming review. Let alone what he sells.

Table 1 below displays the keywords for each informant's answers related to influence of social media and digital marketing.

Table 1. Influence of Social Media and Digital Marketing

Code	Frequency
Influenced by Marketing Strategy	12
Influenced by Influencer Advertisement	13
Not Influenced	9

4.2. Perception and Attitudes of Sustainable Products among Gen Z

Next, when it comes to contribution, researcher also investigate the perception and attitudes of sustainable products among Generation Z. In terms of achieving the stated objectives, the informants were asked on the topics that related to environmental concerns, their thoughts on sustainable fashion as well as companies showcase. Overall, the participants express that sustainable products are too expensive especially to students and people who do not have fixed salary yet. P12 confirms the statement as she is a first-year student, "Tak sebab most of the product's yang contribute to environmental preservation ni harga dia mahal". This stance then continues with words from P5, "Penting... cuma tu lah harga mahal. Lagi bagus kalau diorang minimize kenaikan harga kalau nak change to sustainable". However, this opinion then supported by the urges to save the planet. Although it quite expensive but in order to preserve the environment, it is recommended to practice on becoming a sustainable consumer. As said, P6 advice others to practice sustainability, "Aku akan nasihat orang tu. Pernah ada situasi, aku ada nasihat kawan aku. Dia kata nak charger laptop dia waktu tidur. Tapi aku tak bagi sebab aku kata bahaya buat macamtu, bahaya untuk dia, dan bahaya untuk laptop dia. Kalau bahaya untuk manusia, seperti yang kita cakap awal tadi, boleh meletup. Bahaya untuk laptop pula, bateri boleh kembang. Bila dah kembang, confirm kita akan tukar bateri. Dekat sini dah tidak eco-friendly. Sebab bateri nak dilupuskan mengambil masa yang lama. Jadi, bagi aku nasihat adalah cara aku untuk counter mereka yang unsustainable ni".

Table 2 below displays the keywords for each informant's answers related to perception and attitudes of sustainable products among gen z.

Table 2. Perception and Attitudes of Sustainable Products among Gen Z

Code	Frequency
Contribute to Environmental Preservation	15
Company Offer Sustainable Products	15
Sustainable Fashion	12
Expensive Products	6
Not into Fashion	2

4.3. Expectations and Preferences in Sustainable Advertising

As the study goes deeper, the researcher wants to know the thoughts, the messages or even the content itself that Gen Z expects resulting from dedicating to sustainability concepts. On the whole, all participants leave few suggestions to sellers broadly. They hope the reflections will actually help improve their business. The participants also share their ideas and intentions in order to let the next generation to have a better home in future. For instance, P4 talks about consistency with products quality. This is because, nowadays seller only focused on profits and neglecting shortcomings and weakness of the products. As such, this is said in the interview, *“Konsisten dengan kualiti barang. Contoh stoking FOS yang aku beli... yang lama punya tahan tapi yang sekarang hampeh senang bulu. Dengan harga lagi mahal...”*. Besides, P10 also response with quite constructive opinion where she mentions that company should aligned the voucher according to every item, *“Saya selalu terlepas voucher atau tak pandai untuk menggunakannya. Jadi mungkin pembelian atas talian boleh sekatakan voucher atau ganjaran mengikut barang yang dipilih. Untuk luar talian mungkin harga boleh direlevankan seperti dalam talian untuk menarik perhatian para pelanggan”*. This statement can somehow turn out to be a solid strategy for most sellers and startup out there.

Table 3 below displays the keywords for each informant’s answers related to expectations and preferences in sustainable advertising.

Table 3 Expectations and Preferences in Sustainable Advertising

Code	Frequency
Improvement on Marketing	16
Implement Effective Marketing Strategies	14

5. Discussion

In this topic, this section explains the findings of the study based on the study objectives. For this objective, research question formulated “How to investigate the role of corporate digital communication strategies in shaping Gen Z students’ attitudes toward sustainable consumer practices?”. As said, the result in question is to understand the influence of social media and digital marketing. First, from the perspectives of easily influenced by marketing strategy, 12 out of 18 participants say that they are very persuadable. Besides, in terms of influencer, 13 informants are effortlessly attracted by anything that were reviewed or sell. However, they are still many people that strong-willed and not easily influenced, identical to 9 informants interviewed. With regard to influence of social media and digital marketing, the participants also expressed that the tactics nowadays are very aggressive. This is due to the exposure of various advertisements. Naturally, many people are affected by this digital marketing tactics exactly like 13 participants impacted.

In relation to this stance, one of the participant responses that somehow even the digital marketing tactics may be expressed as aggressive, but it actually a significant impact on individuals like her who are more susceptible to influence and invested in any products that were market. Likewise, she claims that every time she is on any online platforms, the influencer effectively persuaded her to purchase any items they distributed. Following that, each time she visited the store, the promoter convincingly encouraged her to buy the products that being promoted. She also exhibits a strong possession to obtain whatever the promoter displays without demonstrating any hesitation in finalizing a transaction. Similarly to other participant, they will purchase everything that on market.

However, the influence honestly is not solely on the items advertised, but rather it is the individual’s behaviour because not everyone is a shopaholic. Coincidentally, the social media algorithm aligns with their preferences and along with the promoter as well, they experienced a stroke of luck when this type of customer was encountered.

Furthermore, while we speak about contribution, many informants agree that it is important to practice sustainable as it will nurture the earth. As said, 15 out of 18 participants support to choose sustainable products because they contribute to environmental preservation. Equally, 15 participants also acknowledge that companies should offer to market sustainable products broadly. Regarding sustainable fashion, 12 informants find this concept interesting and important to apply on every single soul on earth. On the other hand, they are still many who are not into fashion, let alone their concern on sustainable fashion, just like the 2 participants interview recorded. In acquiring sustainable goods, there are also some informants in which 6 participants who stated that although it is a reasonable thing for people to sustainable practices, but the products practically are expensive making it difficult to be a main choice in completing a purchase. Nonetheless, it is still a significant item to buy especially for those who have sensitive skin or any concerns towards skin in the same way as three informants clarified.

In the sequence, the researcher stumbled upon the thoughts, the messages and even the content itself that Gen Z expects resulting from dedicating to sustainability concepts. That said, all informants leave few recommendations to sellers comprehensively. First, out of 18 responses, 16 participants suggest that sustainable advertising should make improvements on their advertising skills and marketing in order to stay relevant. On account of that, 14 participants proposed to implement more effective marketing strategies on both online and offline platforms. This can be explained by majority responses of participants suggesting that sellers should manage the pricing on sustainable products where people commonly found it is pricier than regular items. Hence, many people may not make a purchase due to budget constraints. Regardless, customers are still expecting the products they bought will eventually receive as per reviewed, similar to 4 informants answers.

6. Conclusion

In summary, to get beyond this obstacle, new, bizarre marketing techniques like guerrilla and viral marketing have been created where influencer marketing has become more and more important in recent years. This type of marketing, or the use of opinion leaders in marketing strategies, is undoubtedly not new; since the dawn of mass society at the turn of the 20th century, businesses have used these individuals to spread their messages through conventional media like television and movies. The figure of the influencer which originated on blogs and expanded on YouTube and Facebook, has seen exponential growth thanks to TikTok and Shopee. As a result, businesses are placing bets on this new form of communication between corporate leaders and Gen Z’s. TikTok is even creating new e-commerce features, like the ability to link to websites directly from stories or products in photos. It’s also important to note that TikTok and Shopee allow users to clearly identify brand sponsorship in photos or videos.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding

the publication of this paper.

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