

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS OF YOUNG CONSUMERS: THE GAP BETWEEN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR WITH THE PERCEPTION OF ENVIRONMENTALLY ORIENTED COMPANIES

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Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to examine the level of environmental awareness among young consumers and to identify the gap between their pro-environmental attitudes and actual consumption behavior. The study also explores whether perceptions of environmentally oriented products extend to broader evaluations of companies, including their overall corporate image.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a quantitative research design based on a structured questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of 172 young consumers in Croatia. The survey measures environmental awareness, attitudes towards eco-labelled products, purchasing frequency, perceived barriers and motivators of sustainable consumption, and includes open-ended questions for qualitative insights. Data are analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses are used to support interpretation. The paper is positioned within the theoretical framework of sustainable consumption and sustainable business models.

Findings: The results reveal a pronounced attitude–behavior gap. Although respondents express positive attitudes towards environmental protection, eco-labelled products are mostly purchased only occasionally. Product quality and perceived health benefits are the main motivators of sustainable consumption, while higher prices, limited availability, and low trust in eco-certifications represent key barriers. Trust in environmental labels is moderate, with a large share of neutral responses. Qualitative findings indicate that environmentally responsible companies are perceived as more socially desirable, suggesting that eco-branding influences broader corporate image beyond consumption.

Research limitations/implications The study is limited by convenience sampling, a single-country context, and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should use larger and cross-national samples, apply inferential methods, and directly examine links between environmental awareness, green branding, and employer attractiveness.

Practical implications: Companies should reduce price and availability barriers, improve transparency of eco-labels, and align sustainability communication with verified practices. Eco-branding may strengthen corporate reputation among young consumers when supported by credible sustainability actions.

Originality/value: The paper contributes empirical evidence on the environmental attitude–behavior gap among young consumers and extends existing research by linking sustainable consumption patterns with perceptions of corporate environmental orientation.

Keywords: environmental awareness; young consumers; sustainable consumption; eco-branding; corporate image.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Issues of sustainable development and environmental protection have gained increasing importance in economic and business discourse over recent decades. Faced with climate change, the depletion of natural resources, and growing regulatory pressures, companies are increasingly oriented towards developing business models that integrate environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Bansal, 2005). In this context, consumer behavior is recognized as one of the key factors shaping market trends and driving changes in corporate business strategies (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018).

Particular attention in the literature is devoted to young consumers, who are often perceived as a more environmentally aware group with greater sensitivity to issues of sustainable consumption. Research indicates that young people express positive attitudes towards environmental protection and support sustainable products and practices (Kokkinen, 2013). However, despite a high level of declared environmental awareness, numerous studies point to the existence of a significant gap between consumers' attitudes and their actual behavior, especially in the context of purchasing environmentally friendly products (Hassan et al., 2010; Perron et al., 2006).

Environmental awareness encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of personal responsibility for environmental conditions, as well as the willingness to adapt consumption decisions accordingly (Kokkinen, 2013). Nevertheless, empirical findings show that positive attitudes do not necessarily translate into sustainable behavior, as consumer decisions are often constrained by economic and market factors, such as higher prices of environmentally friendly products, limited availability, and a lack of trust in the credibility of environmental certifications (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018).

Understanding the gap between environmental attitudes and actual behavior among young consumers is particularly important for the development of sustainable business models. Companies seeking to integrate sustainability into their operations face the challenge of aligning

environmental objectives with real consumer behavior and the purchasing power of target groups (Bocken, 2020). Therefore, analyzing the behavioral patterns of young consumers can provide valuable insights into the barriers and motivators of sustainable consumption and contribute to more effective business and market strategies.

Based on the above, the aim of this paper is to analyze the environmental awareness of young consumers and to examine the existence of a gap between their attitudes and actual consumer behavior, with particular emphasis on the factors that hinder the transformation of environmental awareness into concrete purchasing decisions.

2. Literature Review

The concept of sustainable development represents a fundamental framework for understanding contemporary economic and business changes related to environmental protection. According to the definition provided in the Brundtland Report, sustainable development refers to meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This concept has been further elaborated through the integration of environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability, which together form the basis for the development of long-term sustainable business models (Bansal, 2005; Strezov et al., 2017).

In the business context, sustainable business models are increasingly viewed as a response to growing environmental challenges and shifts in consumer preferences. Authors emphasize that integrating sustainability into business models enables the reduction of negative environmental impacts, more efficient resource use, and the achievement of long-term competitive advantage (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Bocken, 2020). Particular attention is given to circular business models, which contribute to waste reduction and more rational resource use through recycling, reuse, and extending product life cycles (Bocken, 2020).

A central role in the development of sustainable business models is played by consumer environmental awareness. Environmental awareness is defined as a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and capabilities that guide consumers towards behaviors with a lower negative impact on the environment (Kokkinen, 2013). Research suggests that higher levels of environmental awareness positively influence consumer attitudes towards sustainable products and practices, but not necessarily their actual behavior (Hassan et al., 2010).

Special attention in the literature is devoted to young consumers, who are often identified as a group with heightened sensitivity to sustainability issues. Although young people generally demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding the importance of environmental protection, empirical findings confirm the existence of a gap between their declared attitudes and actual

purchasing decisions (Hassan et al., 2010; Perron et al., 2006). This gap is most commonly explained by economic and market constraints, such as higher prices of environmentally friendly products, limited availability, and a lack of trust in the credibility of environmental labels and certifications.

The literature also emphasizes that awareness alone is insufficient to change behavior without adequate institutional, market, and organizational support. Perron et al. (2006) highlight that continuous education, transparency, and trust are key prerequisites for transforming environmental awareness into sustainable behavior, while Geissdoerfer et al. (2018) warn of the need to align business strategies with consumers' real purchasing capabilities.

Based on the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that although the environmental awareness of young consumers represents an important potential for the development of sustainable business models, its actual market impact depends on the ability of companies and institutions to remove barriers that prevent the consistent application of sustainable consumption decisions. This relationship between awareness and behavior constitutes the central research issue of this paper.

3. Methodology

The empirical research was conducted with the aim of examining the environmental awareness of young consumers and analyzing the gap between their attitudes and actual consumer behavior. A quantitative research approach was applied using a questionnaire survey method.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering questions related to the level of environmental awareness, attitudes towards environmentally friendly products, the frequency of their purchase, and perceptions of barriers and motivators of sustainable consumption. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions and statements measured using a Likert scale, enabling a standardized analysis of respondents' attitudes.

The research sample consisted of young consumers in the Republic of Croatia, with a total of 172 respondents participating in the study (in 2025). A convenience sampling method was used, and data collection was conducted anonymously and voluntarily, in accordance with ethical research principles.

Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and basic measures of central tendency. The results enabled the identification of dominant attitudes, behavioral patterns, and key barriers contributing to the gap between environmental awareness and actual consumer behavior among young consumers.

The methodological approach used in this study provides insight into the perceptions and behavior of young consumers; however, it also has certain limitations related to the size and structure of the sample and the use of self-reported measures, which should be considered when interpreting the results.

4. Results

The research results are based on the analysis of responses from 172 young respondents in the Republic of Croatia. The analysis focuses on examining the level of environmental awareness, consumer habits related to environmentally friendly products, and perceptions of barriers and motivators of sustainable consumption.

The results indicate that the majority of respondents occasionally purchase products with environmental labels, with 56.4% reporting occasional purchases. A smaller proportion of respondents stated that they rarely purchase environmentally friendly products (25.6%), while 4.7% reported that they do not purchase such products at all. Regular purchases of environmentally friendly products were reported by a relatively small share of respondents, indicating limited frequency of sustainable consumption among young consumers.

As the main motivators for purchasing environmentally friendly products, respondents most frequently highlighted product quality and healthier ingredients (71.5%). Concern for the environment was cited as a motivator by 26.7% of respondents, while other reasons were mentioned to a much lesser extent. These findings indicate that young consumers' motivation for purchasing environmentally friendly products is more strongly linked to personal benefits than to purely environmental considerations.

On the other hand, the results clearly identify barriers limiting more frequent purchases of environmentally friendly products. The most commonly cited barrier was the higher price of environmentally friendly products, indicated by 64.5% of respondents. A lack of trust in environmental certifications and labels was reported by 32.6% of respondents, while 27.3% pointed to insufficient availability of environmentally friendly products on the market. These findings point to the existence of structural and market-related constraints in the application of sustainable consumption.

The analysis of trust in environmental labels shows a moderate level of confidence among respondents. Approximately 39% stated that they generally trust environmental labels, while 40.7% expressed a neutral position. A smaller proportion of respondents expressed distrust towards environmental certifications, indicating an uneven perception of their credibility.

The results also show that respondents perceive their own influence on companies' business strategies as limited but not negligible. More than half of respondents (52.3%) believe that their consumer choices partially influence companies' business decisions, while 19.8% believe they have a significant influence. At the same time, a smaller proportion consider their influence on business strategies to be insignificant.

Regarding willingness to change consumption habits, the majority of respondents express a certain degree of readiness. Partial willingness to change habits for environmental protection was reported by 66.9% of respondents, while 26.7% indicated full willingness to change. A smaller proportion of respondents expressed no willingness to change their consumption behavior.

Finally, the results indicate perceptions of future trends in environmental awareness. The majority of respondents (66.3%) believe that consumer environmental awareness will increase in the future, albeit at a slower pace, while nearly half of respondents perceive the level of environmental awareness in the Republic of Croatia as lower compared to other countries.

In the final section of the questionnaire, a smaller number of respondents provided additional comments and suggestions related to the research topic. Although most participants did not offer additional comments, the collected responses provide valuable qualitative insights into the attitudes of young consumers.

Beyond the above, qualitative responses point to broader implications of companies' environmental orientation. Respondents implicitly associate corporate environmental responsibility with social desirability, perceiving environmentally responsible companies more positively. These attitudes suggest that environmentally friendly products and sustainable business practices not only shape consumer purchasing decisions but also influence the overall perception of companies as socially responsible organizations.

In this context, the results of the open-ended questions point to a potential relationship between environmental product branding and a company's broader image, including its attractiveness to young people as future employers. Although this study does not directly examine employer perceptions, the obtained responses open space for future research to more systematically analyze the relationship between young consumers' environmental awareness, consumer attitudes, and perceptions of companies in their role as employers.

5. Discussion

The obtained results confirm findings from previous research indicating a relatively high level of environmental awareness among young consumers, accompanied by a limited frequency of actual sustainable consumption behavior. Although most respondents occasionally purchase products with environmental labels, regular purchasing remains uncommon, pointing

to a pronounced gap between attitudes and behavior. This pattern is consistent with literature emphasizing that environmental awareness, while a necessary prerequisite, is not sufficient on its own to drive changes in consumer decision-making (Kokkinen, 2013; Hassan et al., 2010).

The results further indicate that motivators of sustainable consumption among young consumers are more frequently linked to personal benefits, such as perceived higher product quality and health advantages, rather than purely altruistic or environmental motives. These findings confirm that the environmental aspect of products is often evaluated through individual benefits, while concern for the environment plays a secondary role in purchasing decisions. At the same time, identified barriers—high prices, lack of trust in certifications, and limited availability—confirm the existence of market and structural constraints that hinder consistent sustainable consumption, in line with research on barriers to the implementation of sustainable business models (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Bocken, 2020).

A particularly interesting finding relates to young consumers' perception of their own influence on corporate business strategies. Although respondents generally do not perceive themselves as having strong individual influence, the majority believe that their consumer choices partially shape corporate behavior. Such perceptions suggest an awareness of collective market power, which represents an important prerequisite for long-term changes in business practices and sustainability strategies.

Qualitative insights obtained from open-ended questions further extend the interpretation of quantitative results. Respondents implicitly associate companies' environmental orientation with their social desirability, evaluating environmentally responsible companies more positively. These attitudes indicate that environmentally friendly products and sustainable business practices do not operate solely at the level of market supply but also shape the broader image of companies as socially responsible organizations.

These findings are consistent with recent research demonstrating that sustainability and corporate social responsibility significantly influence perceived organizational attractiveness, particularly among young people entering the labor market. Presley, Presley, and Blum (2018) empirically show that companies applying sustainable business principles, including environmental practices, are perceived as more attractive employers and increase young people's willingness to accept job offers. Similarly, Rzemieniak and Wawer (2021) demonstrate that sustainability measures integrated into employer branding positively influence the motivation of Generation Z candidates to apply for jobs, with certain gender-related differences in perception.

Furthermore, Carballo-Penela et al. (2023) highlight that communicating a company's commitment to sustainability during recruitment processes increases perceived organizational attractiveness, with factors such as organizational prestige and cultural context playing an important role. These findings are further supported by Thang et al. (2023), who show that among Generation Z, attitudes towards corporate social responsibility influence job pursuit intentions through the perceived attractiveness of the employer.

In this context, the results of the present study suggest that environmental product branding may have effects that extend beyond consumption and reflect on the overall perception of companies. For young consumers, who also represent the future workforce, sustainability and environmental responsibility may become important elements in evaluating the social acceptability and desirability of companies. Although this study does not directly examine employer perceptions, qualitative responses indicate a potential link between young consumers' environmental awareness, their perception of products, and the broader corporate image, including attractiveness as future employers.

These findings open avenues for future research to more systematically connect young consumers' environmental awareness with concepts of green branding, organizational image, and employer attractiveness. They further confirm that sustainability is not merely a market or marketing tool but may become an integral part of a company's overall value proposition in the eyes of younger generations.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze the level of environmental awareness among young consumers and to examine the gap between their attitudes and actual consumer behavior. The research results confirm that young consumers in the Republic of Croatia exhibit a relatively high level of environmental awareness and positive attitudes towards sustainable consumption; however, this awareness is only partially reflected in their actual market decisions. The limited frequency of purchasing environmentally friendly products points to the existence of a gap between attitudes and behavior, primarily conditioned by economic and market-related factors.

The study shows that young consumers' motivation to purchase environmentally friendly products more often stems from perceptions of quality and personal benefits than from exclusively environmental reasons, while high prices, lack of trust in certifications, and limited product availability represent key barriers to sustainable consumption. These findings confirm that environmental awareness, although a necessary prerequisite, is not sufficient to ensure consistent changes in consumer behavior without adequate institutional and market support.

A particular contribution of this study lies in the qualitative insights pointing to broader implications of companies' environmental orientation. Young consumers implicitly associate corporate environmental responsibility with social desirability, perceiving environmentally oriented companies more positively not only as producers but also as socially responsible organizations. These attitudes suggest that environmental product branding may shape a company's broader image and potentially influence its attractiveness to young people as future employers.

Although this research does not directly examine companies in their role as employers, the obtained results open space for future studies to more systematically analyze the relationship between young consumers' environmental awareness, consumer attitudes, and perceptions of companies as socially responsible and desirable organizations. This confirms that sustainability goes beyond its role as a market tool and may become an important element of long-term corporate reputation and overall value proposition in the eyes of younger generations.

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