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PERCEIVED BRAND QUALITY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH BRAND TRUST AMONG GENERATION Z CONSUMERS

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Purpose: The main goal of this article is to present the relationship between Generation Z consumers' perception of the quality of their favourite brand and their brand trust. Specific goals include understanding Generation Z consumers' perception of the quality of their favourite brand, measuring their brand trust, determining the correlation between perceived brand quality and brand trust, and identifying which demographic factors statistically significantly differentiate respondents' perception of brand quality and their declared brand trust.
Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted on a sample of 500 consumers in August-September 2023 throughout Poland. The method used in the study was a diagnostic survey. The Kruskal-Wallis test, Mann-Whitney U test, and Spearman's rho correlations were used for statistical analysis. The research sample was selected at random. The study involved people aged 18 to 28 who follow clothing brands on social media.
Findings: The study showed a strong, positive relationship between perceived brand quality (assessed, among other things, by reliability, excellent features/experience) and trust in the brand. The higher the brand quality is rated, the greater the trust in it. Gender is the strongest factor differentiating the perception of quality and trust. The component "I think it's an honest brand" proved to be universal for both genders and strongly correlated with the belief that the brand is worth its price. The statement about offering a high-quality experience received the highest average rating and was one of the few that was not differentiated by gender or age.
Research limitations/implications: The results of the study prompt a more in-depth analysis of perceived brand quality and Generation Z consumers' trust in brands. One suggestion would be to conduct a study aimed at identifying the factors that determine the different attitudes of Generation Z women and men towards the assessment of the quality of the brands they use, and to break down the concept of "experience" into its constituent factors, i.e., speed of delivery, customer service, personalization, in order to identify which element of the purchasing path has the greatest impact on building trust.
Practical implications: This article provides practical recommendations for managers and marketing strategists, emphasizing the need to deliver high-quality products and investing in building positive customer experience. It also recommends demographic segmentation based on gender in marketing strategies aimed at Generation Z.
Originality/Value: Despite considerable interest in the relationship between perceived brand quality and brand trust, the marketing literature shows an insufficient number of studies focusing on Generation Z consumers. Filling this research gap is of strategic importance. Given

the size and purchasing power of Generation Z, understanding their specific expectations and trust-building mechanisms is crucial for companies.
Keywords: brand, quality, perceived brand quality, brand trust.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The modern consumer market is characterized by dynamic changes in buyer behaviour, forcing brands to constantly search for effective strategies to build lasting relationships with customers. In this context, two fundamental concepts: perceived brand quality and brand trust, are gaining importance as key determinants of market success.

Perceived quality is a consumer's subjective assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of a product or service compared to others. In marketing literature, it is recognized as a key element of *brand* equity that influences consumers' purchasing decisions. The theory of perceived value suggests that the higher the perceived quality, the greater the likelihood that the consumer will trust the brand, which in turn is the foundation for building a lasting relationship with the brand.

Generation Z is a very specific group in the consumer market. It is characterized by a critical approach to brands and high expectations of their products**.** It definition of "quality" is much broader than that of previous generations. For Generation Z, brand quality is measured not only by the functional characteristics of products, such as durability or reliability, but also by the values that the brand represents, their experiences, and the opinions of other people. To meet these demands, brands must take a holistic approach to their value proposition. This is essential because, for this generation, these values have become integral components of perceived quality and trust.

Despite growing interest in the relationship between perceived brand quality and brand trust, the marketing literature still shows an insufficient number of studies focusing on Generation Z consumers. This research gap is particularly significant given that Generation Z is one of the largest and most influential demographic groups in the consumer market. The lack of detailed research on their specific mechanisms of quality perception and trust building means that companies may operate on incomplete information, making it difficult to effectively reach this key market segment and build lasting relationships with it.

This article aims to fill this gap by contributing to marketing theory and providing recommendations for managers, enabling them to build more effective relationships with this consumer group. The main objective of the article is to present the relationship between Generation Z consumers' perception of the quality of their favourite brand and their trust in the brand.

Within this main objective, the following intermediate objectives have been identified: To understand Generation Z consumers' perception of the quality of their favourite brand; To measure Generation Z consumers' trust in the brand; To determine the correlation between perceived brand quality and brand trust; To learn which demographic factors (gender, age, professional status, and place of origin of the respondent) statistically significantly differentiate the way respondents perceive brand quality and their declared trust in the brand.

In light of the objectives set, the main hypothesis adopted in this study is that the brand quality perceived by Generation Z consumers is related to their trust in the brand.

2. Theoretical basis for the perceived brand quality of Generation Z consumers

Perceived brand quality is an important factor influencing how consumers perceive and evaluate a given brand's products. It can be defined as a customer's assessment of the advantages, excellence, credibility, and differences of a given brand compared to other brands. It is worth noting that consumers build their own quality parameters in their minds. Perceived quality is not the same as actual quality – it is based on the recipient's impression and experience, which may or may not correspond to the actual characteristics of the product, and therefore differs from the concept of actual quality (Dębski, 2009). As Bielski and Bielska-Dąbrowa (2014) emphasize, a strong brand is built not only through the actual quality of the product, but above all through the ability to shape positive consumer beliefs about that quality. This is because it refers to the consumer's subjective perception of how a given brand is viewed in relation to others.

Both the actual quality of the products offered and the quality that results from the buyer's perceptions of the brand directly influence the opinion about the brand, its perception, and thus its position in the market among competitors (Przybylska, 2010). When choosing a product, quality is one of the factors considered by consumers in determining whether the choice is appropriate and meets their needs or not (Budiyono, Sulistyo, 2022). In this sense, perceived quality constitutes added value. High perceived quality can lead to greater trust in the brand, manifested in an increased willingness to repurchase. In addition, consumer respect for the brand is linked to the perception of brand quality. In order for a brand to gain respect among consumers, it must be associated with the expected quality (Tarapata, 2017).

The quality of a brand as perceived by Generation Z consumers is the result of many factors. In the digital economy, traditional product quality paradigms based on objective technical parameters are giving way to subjective perceptions shaped by customer experience and, above all, social media. For Generation Z, brand quality is not an autotelic value, but rather the result of its presence in the digital sphere and recommendations from opinion leaders. Influencers act

as quality curators, selecting brands that, in the opinion of consumers, gain the status of "proven" and "trustworthy" (Awdziej, Tkaczyk, 2017). Social media has changed the definition of quality from "durability" to "image utility". A high-quality product is one that is aesthetically suited to the visual standards of platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. Furthermore, a brand that is promoted by an influencer involved in the *slow fashion* or ecology movement automatically gains a higher quality rating. This phenomenon is confirmed by J. Suchecka, who describes the attitudes of young people for whom purchasing choices are a form of ideological manifestation (Suchecka, 2020). In this view, a brand embroiled in an ethical scandal loses its status as a "quality" brand, while a brand that is committed to sustainable development may be perceived as one of higher quality (Deloitte, 2021).

The specificity of Generation Z's perception of quality is associated with highly dynamic changes. For example, a communication error by an influencer or inconsistency between their actions and the brand's values leads to an immediate devaluation of the product's quality in the eyes of the consumer. In this sense, quality is a continuous process rather than an acquired state. J. Kotarbiński notes that in the world of social media, "a brand is what others say about it" (2014, p. 215) which in the case of Generation Z means that quality is determined by current sentiment in *user-generated content* comments and reviews.

Therefore, for Generation Z, the perceived quality of a brand is determined not only by its functional characteristics, reputation, or consumer experience related to its use, but also by how it is communicated. Perceived brand quality is an individualized subjective assessment by the consumer; it is not synonymous with actual quality.

3. The relationship between perceived brand quality and brand trust – a theoretical approach

Brand trust is understood as a feeling of security and reliability of the brand (Veloutsou, 2015), experienced by the consumer in their interaction with the brand, which is based on the belief that the brand is credible, reliable, and responsible for the interests and well-being of the consumer, and that it fulfils or exceeds its promises and customer expectations (Dobiegała-Korona, 2009). This belief builds trust, which is the foundation of consumer loyalty, long-term relationships, and the commitment of exchange participants.

Generation Z represents a group of buyers with specific psychographic characteristics. In their case, the relationship between perceived quality and trust is strongly moderated by the authenticity of communication. Consumers of this generation often use social media and the opinions of other users to gather information about brands. This generation is particularly sensitive to false information and manipulation. Therefore, a brand that is transparent and fully discloses its business practices is more likely to gain their trust. Any deviation from the declared

quality is interpreted by this age group as a lack of transparency, leading to an immediate erosion of trust.

Three aspects of quality are key in building trust in a brand among Generation Z consumers (Stasiuk, Maison, 2020): product reliability and innovation; efficiency of service and speed of response in digital channels; and alignment of brand activities with social and environmental values. The impact of quality on trust among young consumers is cumulative. This means that for a young consumer, a single mistake can destroy the trust built by a great product. Therefore, traditional models of trust based solely on product reliability are insufficient for younger generations. According to J. Wiktor (2013), Generation Z is more likely than other generations to verify perceived quality through online reviews and social media, which means that trust in a brand becomes a combination of personally experienced quality and quality communicated by the digital environment.

In summary, in the age of widespread access to information, brand quality is verified almost in real time, which means that brand trust in this segment must be constantly confirmed through high-quality communication and product processes. As J. Grzesiak (2019) points out, Generation Z treats the brand as a partner from whom they expect not only functional products, but also stylistically attractive ones that are tailored to their individual needs, as a starting point for building deeper relationships and trust.

4. The relationship between brand quality perception and brand trust in the opinion of Generation Z consumers – methodology and analysis of own research

Research on the attitudes and behaviors of Generation Z consumers towards clothing brands, undertaken as part of UGB research grant No. 853, was conducted on a sample of 500 consumers in August-September 2023 throughout Poland. The method used in the study was a diagnostic survey, Kruskal-Wallis test, Mann-Whitney U test, and Spearman's rho correlations were used for statistical analysis. The research sample was selected at random. People aged 18 to 28 who follow clothing brands on social media were recruited for the study. The quantitative structure of respondents adopted in the study comprised four layers, i.e., gender, age, professional status, and the respondent's place of origin[1]. The study covered several areas. One of them was the perception of the quality of clothing brands purchased by respondents. The aim of the research in this area was to understand how Generation Z

[1] The quantitative structure of the respondents in each stratum was as follows: gender: 50% women, 50% men; location: rural areas – 20%, towns with a population of less than 50,000 – 20%, towns with a population of between 50,000 and 100,000 – 20%, towns with a population of 100,000 to 200,000 – 20%, towns with a population of over 200,000 – 20%; age: 18 to 22 years old – 50% and 23 to 28 years old – 50%; professional status: exclusively studying, exclusively working, studying and working, not working and not studying.

consumers perceive the quality of their favourite brands and to demonstrate the relationship between brand perception and consumer trust in the brand. The study used a seven-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, no opinion, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree.

The issue of Generation Z consumers' perceptions of the quality of their favourite brands was reduced to five statements that respondents referred to in their assessment (figure 1), i.e., *The brand I buy is high quality*, *The brand is worth the price*, *The brand has a consistent level of quality*, *The brand offers a high-quality experience*, *The brand's clothing has excellent properties*. These scales were taken from existing literature (Dwivedi, 2015) but adapted to the context of this study.

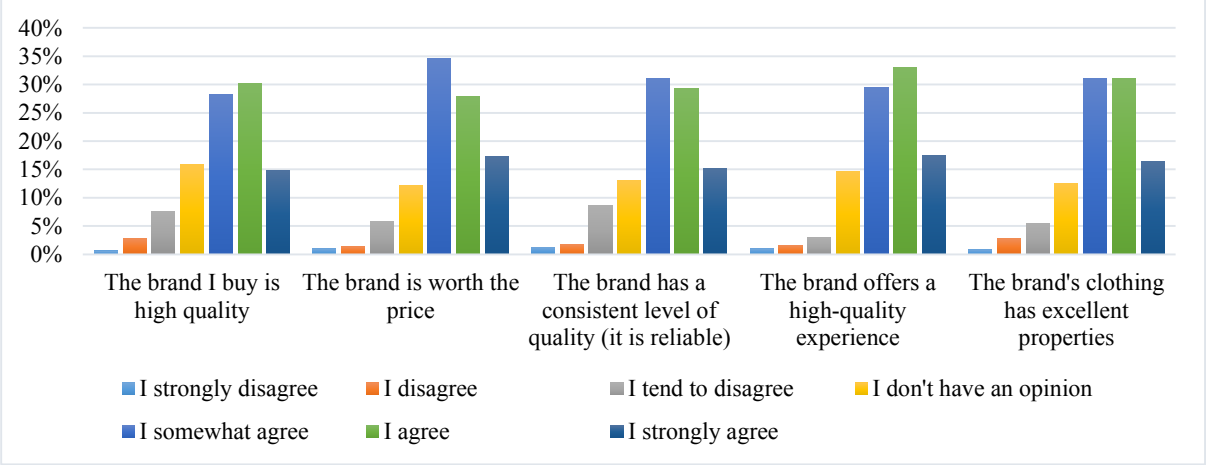


Figure 1. Perception of the quality of Generation Z consumers' favourite brand (N = 500).
Source: own study.

An analysis of the data in figure 1 shows that Generation Z consumers rate the brands they buy highly. As many as 80.0% of respondents said that the brand they buy is worth the price, 79.0% said that the brand offers them a rich experience, e.g., it provides convenience of purchase, and 78.0% said that the clothing they buy has excellent properties, e.g., it retains its colours and is durable in use. A slightly smaller percentage of respondents (73.0%) believe that the brand they buy is of high quality, and 75% believe that this quality is reliable. It can therefore be assumed that what Generation Z consumers buy is important to them. Their choices are guided by the need to purchase good-quality clothing that will serve them for longer, will not wear out quickly, will prove reliable, but will also provide a rich experience both in terms of purchase and subsequent use. A small percentage of consumers surveyed (13.8% on average) have no opinion on the statements included in the figure regarding the perceived quality of the brand they purchase. For this percentage of respondents, it can be assumed that their clothing purchasing behaviour is not preceded by reflection on the quality of the products they buy, or that the quality of the brand and its products is irrelevant to them. Among the respondents, there are also those who deny the good quality of the brand they buy.

The largest percentage of respondents (12.0% on average) deny that the brand they buy has a consistent level of quality, and 11.0% deny that it has good quality at all.

The distribution of respondents' answers presented in figure 1 is reflected in the average ratings, which are all above 5 on a seven-point scale, i.e., they show a high level of brand quality perception (Table 1).

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics for respondents' ratings of behaviours in the area of brand quality perception

Perceived brand quality	Average	Median	Dominant	Standard deviation
The brand I buy is high quality	5.18	5.00	6	1.294
The brand is worth the price	5.30	5.00	5	1.232
The brand has a consistent level of quality (it is reliable)	5.19	5.0	5	1.302
The brand offers a high-quality experience (e.g., convenience of purchase)	5.38	6	6	1.205
The brand's clothing has excellent properties (e.g., it is durable, retains its colours)	5.29	5	5	1.268

* There are many modal values. The lowest value is given.

Source: own study.

A three-point scale taken from the literature (Chaudhuri, Holbrook, 2001) was used to measure consumer trust in the brand, which was also modified for the purposes of the study. It included three statements: *I trust this brand*; *I think it is an honest brand*; *The brand never disappoints me* (figure 2).

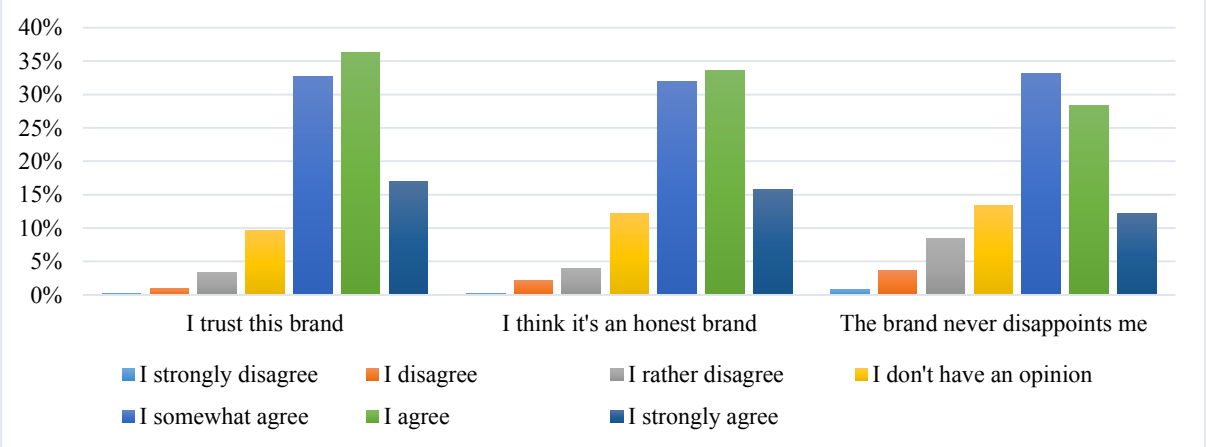


Figure 2. Trust in the favorite brand of Generation Z consumers (N = 500).

Source: own study.

A very high percentage of respondents (80.3% on average) declare their trust in their favourite brand. Among this group, 86% of respondents say they trust the brand, while slightly fewer (73%) rely on the brand, saying that it never disappoints them. It can be assumed that such high ratings are related to positive feelings towards the brand. A favourite brand is one that evokes positive emotions, a need to interact with it and identify with it. However, despite such high confirmation, an average of 8% of respondents do not declare their trust in it, and 11.7% have no opinion on whether their favourite brand is honest, reliable, and trustworthy.

In this case, too, the distribution of respondents' answers shown in figure 2 is reflected in the average ratings, which are all above 5 on a seven-point scale, indicating a high level of consumer trust in the brand (Table 2).

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics for respondents' ratings of behaviours in the area of brand trust

Brand trust	Average	Median	Dominant	Standard deviation
I trust this brand	5.50	6.0	6	1.072
I think it's an honest brand	5.38	5	6	1.158
The brand never disappoints me	5.09	5	5	1.300

Source: own study.

In order to show the relationship between Generation Z consumers' perception of brand quality and their trust in the brand, Spearman's rho correlation test was used. As shown in Table 3, the higher the perceived brand quality, the greater the trust in the brand. This applies to all statements adopted for both brand quality assessment and brand trust. The strongest correlation is between respondents' perception of the brand as one whose clothing has excellent properties (it is durable and retains its colours) and their belief that the brand never disappoints them, as well as between the perception of the brand as one that is worth its price and respondents' belief that it is an honest brand.

Table 3 is key empirical evidence supporting the main hypothesis of the study. It shows that brand trust is not built on a single dimension of quality, but rather on a synergistic combination of tangible product attributes, overall customer experience, and perceived brand integrity and alignment with consumer values. Marketers can use these specific correlations to understand which aspects of perceived quality most effectively build specific dimensions of trust, which can guide their strategic investments.

The research also aimed to determine whether the independent variables adopted in the study, i.e., gender, age, professional status, and the respondent's place of origin, statistically significantly differentiate the way respondents perceive brand quality and their declared trust in the brand.

The age structure of Generation Z respondents was divided into three groups: 18-20 years old; 21-24 years old; 25-28 years old. Due to the age of the respondents, it was found that only in two statements concerning the perceived quality of the brand, i.e., *The brand is worth its price* and *The brand has a consistent level of quality (it is reliable)*, the responses of respondents from the above-mentioned age groups differ significantly statistically. The same applies to the statement: *I think it is an honest brand*. The remaining responses of respondents of different ages, concerning both perceived brand quality and brand trust, are not statistically significantly different (Table 4).

Table 3.
Spearman's rho correlations between respondents' ratings for behaviours in the areas of brand quality perception and brand trust

			Perceived brand quality				
			The brand I buy is of high quality	The brand is worth its price	The brand has a consistent level of quality (it is reliable)	The brand offers a high-quality experience (e.g., convenience of purchase)	The brand's clothing has excellent properties (e.g., it is durable, retains its colours)
Trust in the brand	I trust this brand	Correlation coefficient	**0.511****	**0.515****	**0.520****	**0.488****	**0.530****
		Significance (two-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
		N	500	500	500	500	500
	I think it's an honest brand	Correlation coefficient	**0.529****	**0.564****	**0.534****	**0.476****	**0.495****
		Significance (two-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
		N	500	500	500	500	500
	The brand never disappoints me	Correlation coefficient	**0.555****	**0.532****	**0.530****	**0.520****	**0.565****
		Significance (two-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
		N	500	500	500	500	500

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Source: own study.

Table 4 shows that age has a limited impact on the perception of quality and trust within Generation Z, suggesting a certain homogeneity of consumer behaviour in this regard. Other independent variables included in the study were the respondents' professional status and place of origin.

Table 4.
Kruskal-Wallis test for independent samples – criterion of respondent age

H0	Significance[a,b]	Decision
Distribution **The brand I buy is of high quality** is the same for **the Age** category.	0.155	No basis for rejecting H0
The distribution of **the brand being worth its price** is the same for the **Age** category.	**0.009**	**Reject H0**
The distribution **of Brand has a constant level of quality (it is reliable)** is the same for the **Age** category.	**0.011**	
The **Marka** distribution **offers a high-quality experience (e.g., convenience of purchase) and** is the same for the **Age** category.	0.399	No basis for rejecting H0
The distribution **of Brand clothing has excellent properties (e.g., it is durable, retains its colors)** is the same for the **Age** category.	0.195	
The distribution **of I trust this brand** is the same for **the Age** category.	0.076	
The distribution **of "I think this** is **an honest brand"** is the same for **the Age** category.	**0.001**	**Reject H0**
The distribution **of "The brand never disappoints me"** is the same for the **Age** category.	0.081	No basis for rejecting H0

a. The significance level is 0.050.
b. Asymptotic significance is presented.

Source: own study.

The Kruskal-Wallis test proved that neither the professional status nor the place of origin of the respondents is a variable that significantly differentiates them in terms of perceived brand quality or declared trust in the brand (Table 4). The lack of differentiation according to these variables suggests that the shared experiences of Generation Z may outweigh traditional socio-economic and geographical divisions in the context of clothing brand perception.

The factor that statistically differentiated respondents' perceived brand quality and trust turned out to be their gender (Table 5).

Table 5.
Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples – gender criterion of respondents

H0	Significance [a,b]	Decision
Distribution **The brand I buy is high quality** is the same for the **Gender** category.	**<0.001**	**Reject H0**
The distribution of **"The brand is worth the price"** is the same for the **Gender** category.	**0.016**	
The distribution **of Brand has a consistent level of quality (it is reliable)** is the same for the **Gender** category.	**<0.001**	
The distribution **of Brand offers a high-quality experience (e.g., convenience of purchase)** is the same for the **Gender** category.	0.976	No basis for rejecting H0
The distribution **of Brand clothing has excellent properties (e.g., it is durable, retains its colors)** is the same for the **Gender** category.	**<0.001**	**Reject H0**
The distribution **I trust this brand** is the same for the **Gender** category.	**0.004**	
The distribution **of "I think this** is **an honest brand"** is the same for the **Gender** category.	0.083	No basis for rejecting H0
The distribution **of "The brand never disappoints me"** is the same for the **Gender** category.	**0.003**	**Reject H0**

a. The significance level is 0.050.
b. Asymptotic significance is presented.

Source: own study.

Despite shared generational characteristics, there are clear differences between male and female Generation Z consumers in their approach to perceived quality and trust in the clothing sector, likely resulting from different product needs, aesthetic preferences, or social influences. The fact that *high-quality experience* and *honest brand* are not differentiated by gender suggests that these are universally important attributes for the entire generation, regardless of gender.

5. Summary

The analysis of the conducted research results confirms the hypothesis stated in the study: perceived brand quality has a statistically significant relationship with consumers' trust in the brand. This relationship is directly proportional in nature. These results correspond with the broader body of literature on the subject, indicating the existence of a positive correlation between these variables. (Marakanon, Panjakajornsak, 2017; Alhaddad, 2015; Alan, Kabaday, 2014).

Based on the results of the research obtained, key conclusions can be formulated, which carry significant practical recommendations for managers and marketing strategists:

- There is a strong correlation between Generation Z consumers' perception of brand quality and trust. The higher the brand quality is rated, the greater the trust in it.
- The research confirmed the high overall rating of brands. Generation Z consumers declare a high level of trust and positively evaluate the quality of their favourite brands.
- The strongest association with the belief that a brand "never disappoints" is with the excellent properties of clothing (durability, colour retention). Therefore, marketing campaigns should highlight evidence of durability (e.g., washing tests, material quality).
- The perception of a brand as "fair" is most strongly correlated with the belief that it is worth its price. Therefore, the pricing strategy should not be based solely on low costs, but on transparent communication of value.
- Gender is the main factor differentiating the perception of quality and trust. For this reason, marketing strategies should be separately profiled for women and men in terms of product functional characteristics. Gender does not differentiate only in the assessment of "high-quality experience" and "brand honesty," which makes these characteristics universal for the entire Generation Z and allows for universal communication on these issues.
- Age has a limited impact on the perception of brand quality and trust, while consumers' place of residence and occupational status do not significantly differentiate their attitudes towards brands. Therefore, marketers can use nationwide, uniform social media campaigns without the need for strong geographic or economic segmentation within this age group.
- More than three-quarters of respondents appreciate a high level of brand experience, including convenience of purchase. In order to build trust in the brand, it is recommended to invest in creating a positive customer experience and a smooth purchasing process.
- For most respondents, choosing clothing is a reflective process – they are guided by the need for durable, reliable products that provide a good shopping experience. Only a small group shows a lack of reflection on the quality of the products they buy

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