
E-Consumption of Food Products as a Manifestation of Sustainable Behavior of Generation Z*

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Abstract:

Purpose: This paper investigates whether the behavior of Generation Z consumers regarding online shopping for food products can be described as sustainable behavior. Young people from this generation are becoming increasingly independent as they are entering the labor market, and their purchase decisions have an impact on market trends. Research focusing on Generation Z as consumers is relatively new, especially when it concerns food products. This study aims to fill the existing research gap.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Data on the studied population were obtained using a standardized survey questionnaire. A total of 514 questionnaires were analyzed. To examine the relationship between selected variables, the Chi-square test was used. The similarity between responses was tested by hierarchical cluster analysis with Ward's linkage method, using the binary distance (squared Euclidean distance).

Findings: The results suggest that Generation Z prefers online forms of food products advertising. Contrary to previous findings reported in the literature, our research found that social media does not play a key role in Gen Zers' purchase processes. Generation Z shows a conscious approach to online shopping, paying special attention to the possibility of comparing products, prices as well as the quality and origin of goods. Having information resources at their fingertips, Gen Zers are prag-matic and analytical in their decision making.

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Practical Implications: *The analysis of the research results and the review of the literature on the subject showed that Generation Z representatives are conscious e-consumers, which is of great importance for shaping future sustainable market trends.*

Originality Value: *It should be emphasized that there is a shortage of empirical research in the discourse on online purchases of food products, and even more so regarding Generation Z, which is only now entering the labor market and taking purchase decisions.*

Keywords: *Sustainable behavior, e-consumption, e-food market, Gen Z, online food shopping, e-consumer.*

JEL classification: *D12, L81.*

Paper Type: *Research study.*

1. Introduction

According to macrostructure researchers, there are three approaches to defining a generation, namely: 1/ all individuals of a similar age; 2/ a group of people born in the same period; 3/ a 'mental cohort', i.e., a group of people with a common worldview originating in events experienced in childhood or youth, which significantly influenced their perception of the world, way of thinking and system of values (Szukalski, 2010).

Therefore, generations are shaped by a number of factors such as socio-economic changes, technological development, political changes and historical events (Howe and Strauss, 1992). The generally accepted generation classification includes, the Silent Generation (these are people born in the years 1922-1944), Baby Boomers (born in the years 1945-1964), Generation X (born in the years 1965-1980), Generation Y (born in the years 1981-1995), Generation Z (born in the years 1996-2009), Generation Alpha (people born between 2010 and 2025) (Bejtkovský, 2016; Munsch, 2021).

The distinguished generations grew up in significantly different times, and their social, economic, political and cultural experiences differ. Each of them was shaped by conditions prevailing at a given time, such as wars, economic crises, cultural trends, technological changes and even consumer behaviors. The attempts to characterize generations should be approached with extreme caution as the findings should be treated as symbolic discriminants which serve classification purpose (Krzyżanowska, Parzonko, and Sieczko, 2021).

Generation Z is also referred to as post-millennials or Generation C (from the words connected, communicating, content-centric, computerized, community-oriented, always clicking) (Świerkosz-Hołyśz, 2016). From the very beginning, Generation Z

has been immersed in the world of modern IT tools and technologies (Pichler, Kohli, and Granitz, 2021). They were raised in the era of the IT boom, which contributed to their extensive knowledge of technological innovations. They perceive reality through the prism of the online world (Fisu, Syabri, and Andani, 2024). ‘Addicted to being online’, young people expect the new technologies to help them make more informed shopping decisions, so they have high demands and expectations towards products, manufacturers and traders (Proporas, Stylos, and Fotiadis, 2017).

This study focuses on Gen Zers’ food purchase decisions, and in this context, it will attempt to validate the following hypothesis:

H1: Generation Z is more receptive and responsive to food and beverage online advertising compared to offline marketing strategies.

Generation Z, growing up in the digital and social media era, is highly susceptible to consumer and advertising trends. A characteristic feature of Generation Z is that they often succumb to trends completely unconsciously. Living in a world where advertising and promotion are omnipresent, especially on social media and online, young people are constantly exposed to various marketing stimuli (Ho and Hsu, 2022). They use mobile devices in the purchasing and post-purchase process, for example by writing a comment, adding a post to a profile or website, informing friends about a product, etc., (Djafarova and Bowes, 2020). Considering the intensity of social media use by Gen Zers, this study attempts to verify the following hypothesis:

H2: Social media plays a key role in the effective promotion of food products among Generation Z representatives.

This generation of consumers has a more pragmatic and realistic approach to shopping (Dimitrova and Ilieva, 2023). They expect access to a wide range of information which they verify before making a purchase. Generation Z analyzes not only what they buy, but also the act of consumption itself. Consumption has also taken on a new meaning (Barrera-Verdugo and Villarroel-Villarroel, 2022). For Generation Z – and increasingly for older generations as well – consumption means access to products or services, not necessarily possession of them.

As the online and offline worlds converge, consumers expect more than ever to consume products and services anytime and anywhere, so omnichannel marketing and sales must reach new heights (Gilal *et al.*, 2022). For consumers who are always and everywhere online, the line between online and offline does not exist.

Additionally, they also expect rational pricing. Generation Z is frugal, because they grew up in an environment of economic uncertainty, so they are not interested in wasteful consumption. People from this generation are careful and conscious when it comes to managing their finances. Therefore, the offer targeting Gen Zers should

emphasize high quality investment, opportunities and discounts, (for example, the fact that freebies are sent without shipping charges) (Deloitte Polska, 2022). They want high quality products, but at the same time they are aware of their financial limitations.

Therefore, they look for products that combine good quality with an affordable price. This interest in quality, combined with price sensitivity, suggests that Generation Z is more conscious when taking purchase decisions than it might seem. These are consumers who want to feel that their purchase has value, both in terms of the quality of the product and the price. So, do Generation Z's purchase decisions fit into the concept of sustainable consumption and can their behavior be described as sustainable? To address this question, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H3: Generation Z's sustainable behavior is reflected in their online food shopping process.

By focusing on Gen Zers' behavior regarding food shopping we wish to fill a research gap. There are few studies in the literature on Generation Z as consumers of food products. The lack of research on Generation Z can be attributed to earlier studies that overrepresented millennials, who used to be the largest generational cohort (Haddouche and Salomone, 201).

Demographic changes have a significant impact on development trends in the retail industry. Retail trade is increasingly determined by Generation Z consumers, whose consumption contribution is growing. Understanding this generation seems crucial for predicting there the future not only of retail trade, but of the entire economy. Generation Z is a challenge because it behaves differently than the previous generations. This generation is interested in new technologies, wants ease of use, is afraid of reality and has a deep need to feel secure (Choubey and Gautam, 2024).

Using the Internet, they search for information about products and services, compare prices and share their opinions on the use and quality of different brands of products and services (Kucia, 2015). The popularity of online transactions is systematically increasing, because consumers are aware that the advantages prevail over the limitations of online shopping. The decision to do shopping online is facilitated by such actions of e-shops as: simplifying the process of ordering products/services, increasing the security of online payments or securing personal data.

In addition, the owners of e-shops are aware of the limitations of online shopping and consistently eliminate them, e.g. by placing good quality images of products, offering free shipping and returns or securing and insuring products in shipping (Stolecka-Makowska, 2016).

Online shopping for food and beverages is part of the so-called cybernetic consumerism. This consumer trend is particularly noticeable in Generation Z, which

naturally uses information and communication technologies as a source of information about goods/services to take informed shopping decisions (Jach and Miniewicz, 2016).

2. Materials and Methods

To verify the research hypotheses, we conducted empirical research. Data on the determinants of online food purchases made by Generation Z consumers was collected using a standardized research questionnaire. The questionnaire was posted on the Webankieta platform. The survey was conducted in March - April 2024 on a group of Generation Z representatives. To obtain the most complete picture of the analyzed problem, multiple choice questions were used in the questionnaire.

We received 540 questionnaires out of which 514 correctly completed ones underwent statistical analyses. We used purposive sampling based on the age criterion, i.e. subjects born after 1995 and before 2010. The recruitment process consisted of direct contact with potential respondents, during which the purpose of the study was verbally presented, and they were invited to complete the online survey. People who agreed to participate in the study received a direct link to the survey, which enabled them to complete the questionnaire anonymously. For the sample characteristics see Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

		Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	314	61.09%
	Male	200	38.91%
Place of residence	City < 20,000 residents	155	30.16%
	City of 20,000-100,000 residents	93	18.09%
	City >100,000 residents	238	46.30%
	Rural areas	28	5.45%
Age	<=19	149	28.99%
	20-22	304	59.14%
	>=23	61	11.87%

Source: Own research.

Both descriptive statistics and advanced statistical methods were used to analyze the collected data. The data were recorded in the form of binary variables, where the value "1" means the response was selected, and "0" – the response was not selected.

To examine the relationship between selected variables, the Chi-square test was used. The null hypothesis (no relationship) was tested at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The test was conducted on binary data, where 1 meant selecting a particular

response. P values less than 0.05 indicated a significant relationship between variables.

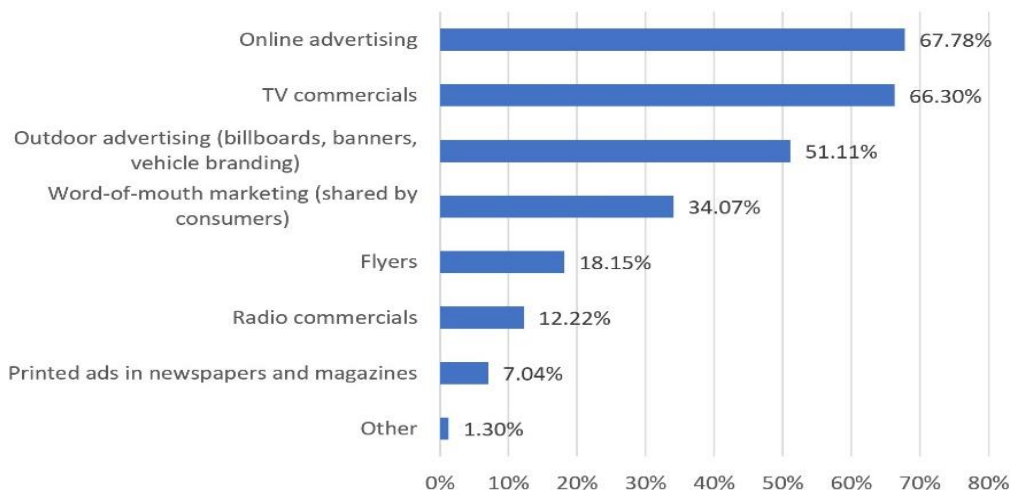
To examine the similarity between the answers, hierarchical cluster analysis with Ward's linkage method was performed, using the binary distance (squared Euclidean distance).

The classification of variables was based on a dendrogram, which allowed for the extraction of clusters of answers that were similar to each other. The analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics ver. 29, which provided precise results and visualizations.

3. Results and Discussion

The research hypothesis (H1) predicts that Generation Z is more receptive and responsive to food and beverage online advertising compared to offline marketing strategies. This hypothesis has been confirmed by the results presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Effectiveness of different types of food product advertising perceived by Generation Z representatives [N=514]



Source: Own research.

Most respondents (2/3) declared that they both noticed and used information about food products provided by online ads (Figure 1). Therefore, the Chi-square test was used for a more detailed analysis, which showed that there is no dependence between responsiveness to online ads and place of residence.

Among this cohort, however, a certain dependence was shown ($p < 0.05$) in the age groups. Subjects aged 23 and older indicated online advertising most often (78.69%), while in the group aged 20-22 it was 71.71% (Table 2).

Table 2. *Distribution of responses regarding online advertising by age of respondents.*

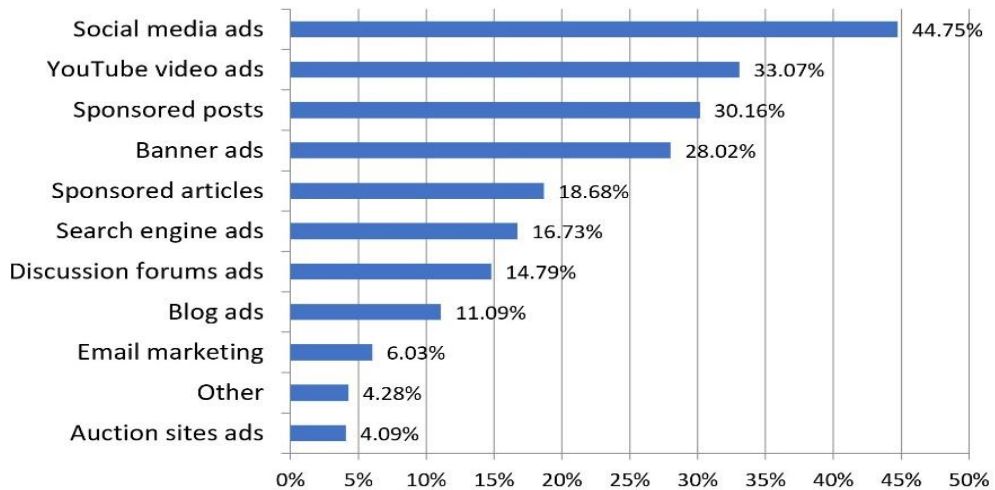
Age group	Response not selected (0)		Response selected (1)		Total	
	Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects	Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects	Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects
<=19	62	41.61%	87	58.39%	149	100%
20-22	86	28.29%	218	71.71%	304	100%
>=23	13	21.31%	48	78.69%	61	100%
Total	161	31.32%	353	68.68%	514	100%

Note: Chi-square test value $p < 0.01$

Source: Own research.

Based on the conducted research, it is not possible to confirm the hypothesis that social media play a key role in the effective promotion of food products among Generation Z representatives. However, advertising on social networking sites was indicated more often than other types on advertising (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Forms of online advertising encouraging Gen Z consumers to buy food products [N=514]*



Source: Own research.

The literature generally describes Generation Z as natural everyday users of smartphones and tablets to search for inspiration, compare offers and make reservations and transactions (Windasari *et al.*, 2022). They often use mobile applications both to purchase goods and to use coupons or discount codes, as well as mobile payments (Paczka, 2020). Generation Z also willingly uses mobile devices in post-purchase processes, evaluating products and services, contacting companies, informing friends about products, and publishing content on their social media

profiles. These are Gen Z's general behavior characteristics. However, previous work did not address specific behaviors like online purchases of food products by this cohort.

Therefore, in our study we checked whether the study participants perceived advertising on social networking sites as encouraging to buy food products based on the reviews of other buyers posted there (Table 3). The obtained results are inconclusive, because 29.77% of respondents declared that social networking sites are important when making purchase decisions and that they are guided by the opinions of other social media users, however, 24.32% of subjects were not guided by the opinions of other consumers and did not indicate social networking sites.

In 2024, the Theydigital Agency (They digital, 2024) in cooperation with SWPS University published a research report, which shows that only 17% of the surveyed representatives of Polish Generation Z declared that they do shopping online. The responses mostly indicated mixed shopping strategies, i.e. including both traditional and online stores (38%). Young people were eager to visit physical second-hand shops (56%) and chain stores (75%). When making purchase decisions, Gen Zers were guided by reviews on the Internet. Interestingly, only 3% of them declared that influencers had an impact on their purchase intentions. The reliable recommendations were those of friends, acquaintances and family.

According to research by Jakubowska *et al.* (2024) Generation Z is characterized by a strong sense of individualism and personal values. They may put their personal beliefs and attitudes first, above social expectations. Szydło and Potmalnik reached similar conclusions in their research, according to which the message of influencers and celebrities viewed on social media does not play a significant role in creating fashion trends and shaping the image of young consumers. They also noted the inconsistencies between their research results and findings obtained from the analysis of literature and fashion websites (Szydło and Potmalnik, 2022).

Our latest research did not confirm the key role of social media in making decisions about purchasing food products online. This is a noteworthy finding in our study. It is necessary to look for reasons why the obtained results do not confirm the findings reported in the literature on the subject. It can be assumed that one of such reasons was the discrepancy in the understanding of the term social media. For example, Tik Tok was not always included in social media by the respondents.

Moreover, as the literature reports, the influence of social media on consumer shopping decisions can usually be seen when knowledge about the product is insufficient, when large sums of money are at stake, and above all when these are not routine purchases, such as buying bread or toilet paper. Simply put, the more knowledge a consumer has about the product, the faster they make decisions, and if they lack information, they look for it in various sources (Parzonko, 2015).

It should also be emphasized that the studied Generation Z included mostly adults, which is a rather narrow group. In Table 2, we can observe the changing values of indicating online advertising in relation to the selected age groups. The studies reported in literature date back to four years ago, where these preferences could have been different. Thus, in our research we confirm the observed dependence of preferences regarding the choice of online advertising on age. This finding should be considered in future studies of Generation Z.

The research by Wojciechowska-Solis *et al.* (2022) shows that social media are an important source of information about food products for Polish young consumers, but not the most important one (the source was indicated both in the first place and in one of the first three places in terms of its importance for respondents).

Table 3. Contingency table of the number and percentage of respondents indicating advertising on social networking sites and being guided by the opinions of other buyers.

		Advertising on social networking sites					
		Response not selected (0)		Response selected (1)		Total	
		Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects	Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects	Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects
Following opinions of other buyers	0	125	24.32%	77	14.98%	202	39.30%
	1	159	30.93%	153	29.77%	312	60.70%
	Total	284	55.25%	230	44.75%	514	100.00%

Note: Chi-square test value $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.015$)

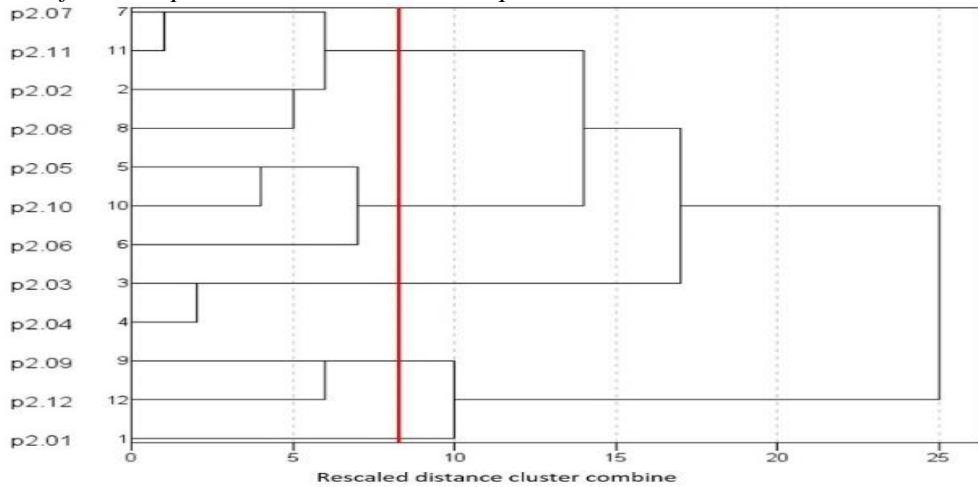
Source: Own research.

In order to verify the hypothesis (H3) stating that sustainable behavior of Generation Z is manifested in the process of online purchases of food products, two questions were asked to the respondents: 1/ the first question concerned the factors influencing the purchase decisions of food and beverage products on the Internet; 2/ the second question concerned the information that the respondents expect when purchasing food and beverage products online.

Using Ward's linkage method with the use of the squared Euclidean distance for binary data, dendrograms were created that allowed for the separation of groups of answers in which the respondents answered similarly (Figures 3 and 4).

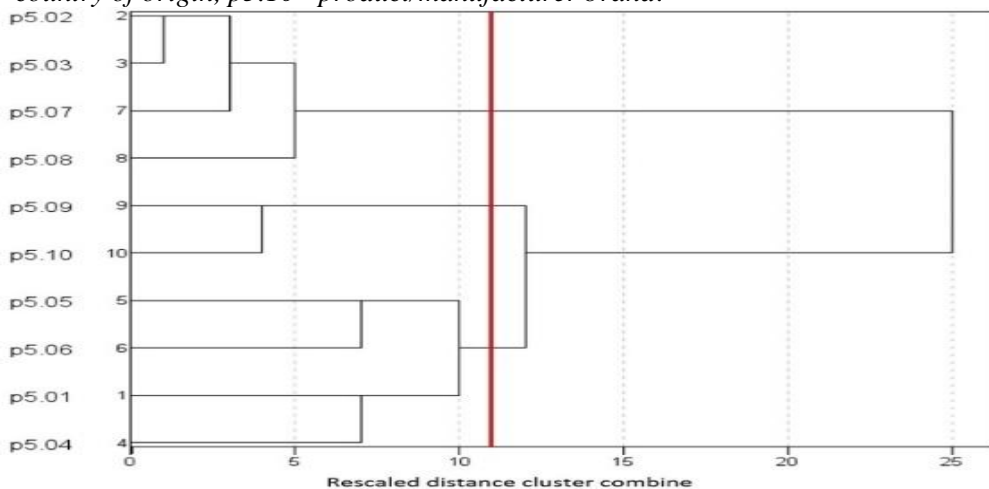
Figure 3. Dendrogram showing distances/similarities for the answers to the question about factors influencing the decision to purchase food products online, where the codes on the Y-axis indicate the following features: p2.01 - it is saving time and fuel when searching for what you need, p2.02 - all sellers are in one place, p2.03 - possibility of comparing prices, p2.04 - possibility of comparing products,

p2.05 - availability of products from all over the country and even the world, p2.06 - lower prices than in traditional stores, p2.07 – online shopping is more thoughtful than in a traditional store, p2.08 - possibility of purchasing and collecting them at any time, p2.09 - possibility of purchasing without leaving home, p2.10 - wider range of products, p2.11 - possibility of purchasing products directly from the manufacturer, p2.12 - no need to stand in queues.



Source: Own research.

Figure 4. Dendrogram showing distances/similarities for the answers to the question about what information respondents expect when purchasing food products online, where the codes on the Y axis indicate the following features: p5.01 - product price, p5.02 - product packaging, p5.03 - product aesthetics, p5.04 - product quality (e.g. certificates, GMO-free), p5.05 - product properties, p5.06 - product composition, p5.07 - production methods, p5.08 - possibility of home delivery, p5.09 - country of origin, p5.10 - product/manufacturer brand.



Source: Own research.

The study assumed that Generation Z demonstrates sustainable behavior when purchasing food products online. This hypothesis was positively verified. The dendrogram presented in Figure 3, in which five groups of answers were arbitrarily distinguished, shows that factors such as the ability to compare prices (p2.03) and the ability to compare products (p2.04) are similar to each other.

There is also a similarity in the group of answers: online shopping is more thoughtful than shopping in a traditional store (p2.07) and the ability to buy products directly from the manufacturer (p2.11). The dendrogram showing similarities in the answers to the question about what information the respondents expect when buying food products online was arbitrarily divided into three groups. The sustainable behavior of this generation of consumers when shopping for food products online is indicated by their answers.

The dendrogram in Figure 4 shows a group of similar answers confirming this hypothesis, namely: product properties (p5.05), product composition (p5.06), product price (p5.01) and product quality (p5.04). The conscious choices of consumers of the analyzed generation are also confirmed by groups of similar answers, namely: the country of origin of the product (p5.09) and the product brand (p5.10).

Similar results were obtained in the McKinsey and Company study (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). It showed that 65% of Generation Z representatives participating in the study particularly value knowledge about what is happening around them and control over it. The same number of respondents (65%) tried to find out where everything they buy comes from – where it is manufactured, what it is made of and how it is manufactured.

Generation Z feel responsible for their actions and expect the same from other market participants. When buying goods, they consider the origin of raw materials, product composition and carbon footprint. Respect for the natural environment and general care for the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants are important to them. They care about this, which is why they pay much more attention than older generations to the social responsibility of brands (Balińska, Jaska and Werenowska, 2024).

Poland is among the European countries supporting the policy of domestic production and short supply chains. High-quality information about products and services significantly increases purchase intentions. This highlights the importance of accurate, relevant and comprehensive product information in making informed decisions. Studies conducted by Savelli and Murmura (2022) and Audina and Pradana (2024) are consistent with our research results as they emphasize that Generation Z can be classified as rational decision makers, which contributes to better understanding of the young consumers and, consequently, the future market.

4. Conclusion

The study hypothesized that Generation Z is more receptive and responsive to online advertising of food compared to offline marketing strategies. The results confirm this hypothesis, as most respondents (2/3) declared that they notice and use information from online ads. The Chi-square test showed no correlation between advertising preferences and the place of residence, but there was a statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.01$) in age groups.

Online advertisements were most often indicated by people over 23 years of age. The lack of correlation between places of residence and the perception of information provided by online advertisements may indicate that the young generation is already a "global" generation.

Further analyses revealed a discrepancy between the research results and previous evidence from the literature on the subject, which often emphasizes the important role of social media in Gen Zers' purchase processes. The hypothesis predicting that social media plays a key role in the promotion of food among Gen Zers was not fully confirmed. The results are inconclusive regarding the influence of other users' opinions on purchase decisions. Only 29.77% of respondents admitted that the opinions of other social media users impact their food shopping decisions.

The hypothesis that sustainable behavior of Generation Z is manifested in the process of online food shopping has been positively verified. The research has shown that the most important factors influencing online purchase decisions include the ability to compare prices, products and access to detailed information on the composition, quality and origin of products.

Addressing the question whether Generation Z's purchasing decisions fit into the concept of sustainable consumption and can their behavior be described as sustainable; we believe that it does. Our research results reveal a profile of a young e-consumer of food products, using the Internet as the primary source of consumer information, analyzing information about the product, convinced of their purchase decisions and paying attention to such aspects of food products as product properties, composition, price, quality, country of origin and brand. We therefore believe that this is a conscious e-consumer, which fits into the concept of sustainable consumption. Our results may be useful for future research and in developing marketing strategies aimed at younger consumers.

Our research results indicate the complexity of Generation Z consumer behavior towards food products advertisements, especially in the context of online marketing strategies and their impact on purchase decisions. The issues addressed in the article are extremely broad. We are aware that not all areas related to Generation Z as an online consumer of food products have been addressed by this research, and those that have been taken up may not have been analyzed to a sufficient degree.

It should be emphasized that there is a shortage of empirical research in the discourse on online purchases of food products, and even more so regarding Generation Z, which is only now entering the labor market and taking purchase decisions.

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