

Differences in Attitude Towards Ethical Shopping between Generations X, Y and Z in a Marketing Communication Context

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Abstract: The need to ensure sustainable consumption is one of society's main challenges. The latest research agrees that current levels must change to achieve long-term sustainability. A prerequisite for sustainable development is sustainable consumption. Communication's role in promoting the purchase of environmentally friendly products is an important field of research in this area. The article aims to identify attitudes towards the ethical aspects of purchasing and their differences among Generation X, Y and Z representatives and use these findings in marketing communication. This information can aid in increasing consumers' awareness about ethical shopping principles. Different approaches were determined through research by the Department of Business and Finance at CZU Prague from 2014–2021, focusing on sustainable shopping and applying ethical principles when purchasing. The research comprises a quantitative questionnaire survey (n = 996) and a statistical data evaluation. It was found that the direct purchase of ethical products was most often carried out by Generation Z and the least by Generation X. When considering ethical values in a purchase decision-making process, Generation X prioritizes the desire to help, whereas Generation Y and Z prioritize the sense of personal responsibility. The Covid 19 pandemic had no major effect on the Generation's approaches.

Keywords: communication; consumption; ethics; generation; marketing; purchase; sustainability

JEL Classification: M31; O13; O44

1. Introduction

In order to correctly target marketing communication and utilise appropriate communication, it is important to understand the attitudes of today's consumers towards ethical shopping. Sustainable consumption is considered one of the main prerequisites for sustainable development (Barber, 2007; Bengtsson et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2017). The connection between ethics and sustainability, on the one hand, and the purchasing decisions of consumers, on the other hand, is evident in the group of people referred to as ethical consumers. These consumers feel responsible for the environment and society and try to express their values through consumption and purchase or, conversely, through targeted boycotts (Davies & Gutsche, 2016; Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Ethical consumers have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for their preference for one product over another. Promoting the purchase of organic products and the role of

communication for sustainable consumption are two important fields of research in this area (Araújo et al., 2021).

The current main obstacles to sustainable consumption include the high price of environmentally friendly products, lack of information and knowledge on the part of consumers, and a generally low level of environmental awareness (Han, 2020; Kreuzer et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2017; Han, 2020). Personal ethical attitudes and values often have limited influence on purchasing decisions (Govind et al., 2021). In some cases, consumers adopt ethical habits in their daily consumption, even if they have little interest in ethics or do not understand it. A frequent reason is the media coverage of negative consumption impacts on the environment.

The main goal of the article is to identify the attitudes towards ethical aspects of purchasing and their differences among representatives of Generations X, Y and Z and use these findings in marketing communication. In terms of communication with different generations of consumers, it was found that empirical research mapping the relationship between sustainable consumption and shoppers in the Czech Republic is limited. Therefore, the paper examines consumers' purchasing decisions regarding ethical aspects and suggests possible ways to address these segments. The study complements the current literature on examining the willingness and reasons to purchase or ignore so-called ethical products in relation to the intensity of their purchase. The research results can probably be used as default data to support targeted ethical purchasing.

2. Theoretical Part

Today's world is experiencing rapid and continuous growth in production and sales, which in turn is a driving force in the growth of global consumption. This causes significant damage to nature as it wastes natural resources and leads to climate change, among other things. Environmental issues have been increasingly discussed in recent years, and not only activists but also ordinary people have started to take an interest in them and talk about them. It is clear that consumers buy environmentally friendly products more often than ever before (Kisieliuskas & Jančaitis, 2022). Sustainable, ethical consumption becomes a phenomenon that influences the ethical decisions of other consumers by creating a culture of ethical consumption (Young, 2017). People are more likely to shop ethically if others around them do as well (Starr, 2009). The study by Davies and Gutsch (2016) also confirms that awareness and knowledge of sustainable and ethical principles are not high among consumers and that people often buy only under environmental pressure. The latest perspectives on sustainable consumption research emphasise the influence of the immediate environment. In this case, the role of citizens organising themselves for a more sustainable lifestyle with changes in individual values (Bachnik & Szumniak-Samolej, 2018; John et al., 2016; Schröder et al., 2019). It is necessary to consider that the problem of consumption is not limited to environmentally friendly products and environmental impacts but is also a social problem (Briceno & Stagl, 2006; Jaeger-Erben & Offenberger, 2014; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014). Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy between attitudes and beliefs about ethical shopping and actual purchase intention (Nicholls & Lee, 2006). Ethical consumerism is a flourishing movement, but

ethically-minded consumers hardly ever shop ethically. Therefore, marketing communication tools can be utilised here very well.

Regarding individuals, ethics and perceptions of sustainability are the results of a process of moral development (Ma et al., 2012). This process can be influenced by the accumulated personal experience and situational factors that shape a person's behaviour. The Generational theory emphasises that the ethics and ethical values of an individual are strongly influenced by common political, social and historical events that were significant for a group of people born and living in a certain time period (VanMeter et al., 2012), the so-called generation. Each generation develops different personal and other values, potentially leading to differences in ethical values and behaviour. Differences in attitudes towards ethical issues among generations can be significant (Verschoor, 2013, Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015).

3. Methodology

The information presented in the article is based on research carried out by the Department of Business and Finance, Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, which dealt with the issue of sustainable purchasing and the application of ethical principles when purchasing in the conditions of the Czech Republic between 2014 and 2021. The questionnaire survey was carried out in a manner that complied with ethical principles and the requirement of anonymity. A total of 5,324 respondents (aged 15–93) voluntarily answered the questionnaires in the monitored period. Data collection was conducted in collaboration with students within their extended family and network of friends through a combination of electronic and face-to-face interviews using Google Forms software. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, which contained a total of 40 questions. The questionnaire, including the wording of the questions, has been slightly modified over the years to adapt to areas of research interest. The questionnaire was distributed only in an electronic form using social networks. The research for 2020 and 2021 also took into account the impact of shopping on the environment, energy and water savings, buying organic food and the experience of shopping without packaging. In 2021, the extent of the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the change in the purchase of ethical products.

For the purposes of this contribution, data related to Generations X, Y and Z were utilised for statistical analysis of the results of a sample survey among the Czech Republic's population in 2021. Only respondents belonging to the given generation of consumers in terms of age were included. Generation X included respondents born between 1965–1980 (Kroth & Young, 2014), Generation Y (millennials) people born between 1982–1995 and the youngest Generation Z (commonly referred to as Gen Z) people born between 1996–2015 (Tahal, 2017). The total frequency of the analysed sample is 996, whilst the distribution of the number of respondents into individual generations is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Generation X, Y and Z respondents in 2021 (number of persons in group)

X	Y	Z	total
274	484	238	996

For the purposes of the article, the following answers to questions from the questionnaire survey were analysed:

- to what extent respondents consider when purchasing whether they can benefit someone (e.g., non-profit organisation, fair-trade, charity, public benefit organisation),
- the extent to which respondents purchase ethical products,
- reasons why they buy or do not buy ethical products,
- where they most often acquire knowledge and information about ethical products,
- whether they boycott products or services, e.g., in the case of the use of child labour, violation of human rights, cruelty to animals,
- for what reasons they are willing to boycott products.

The results of the questionnaire survey were evaluated using absolute and relative frequencies of responses. The answers to selected questions from the questionnaire were then related to the age of the respondents.

The following research questions were specifically defined:

RQ1 Is there a significant difference among generations X, Y and Z when purchasing goods in terms of their interest in their origin?

RQ2 Is there a significant difference in the frequency of purchasing ethical products among generations X, Y and Z?

RQ3 Do YouTubers have a different influence on generations X, Y and Z when making consumer decisions about purchasing ethical products?

And based on them, the following specific statistical hypotheses were tested:

- H_{01} : Interest in the origin of goods does not depend on whether the consumer belongs to generations X, Y and Z.
- H_{02} : The frequency of buying ethical products does not depend on whether the consumer belongs to the X, Y and Z generations.
- H_{03} : The extent to which consumers are influenced by YouTubers when purchasing ethical products does not depend on the consumer's belonging to generations X, Y and Z.

Based on the analysis of contingency tables, the differences between Generations X, Y and Z were tested (the influence of the age factor was assessed). Statistically significant dependence of attitudes on age categories, or generations, was tested using Pearson's χ^2 -test. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. In the case of a proven statistically significant dependence, the strength of this dependence was measured and assessed using the Pearson contingency coefficient or Cramer's V. Based on the residuals, i.e., the differences between actual and theoretical frequencies in contingency tables, the contribution of the given combination of characters leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (proving a statistically significant difference or the influence of the given factor) was then assessed. TIBCO Statistica 13.0.0.15 software for Windows was used for statistical analysis.

Thanks to ongoing and long-term research into the issue of sustainable shopping and the application of ethical principles when purchasing in the Czech Republic, it was possible to define recommendations on how to communicate in the context of ethical values. Based on

the analysis of survey data, consumer attitudes to the ethical aspects of shopping and their development in the 2014–2021 time horizon were identified. The results make it possible to define specific options and tools of communication so that it is possible to both increase customers' awareness of ethical shopping and, at the same time, convince them to buy ethical consumer goods.

4. Results

In order to properly target marketing communication and use appropriate communication tools, it is important to understand the attitudes of today's consumers of Generation X, Y and Z towards ethical shopping.

4.1. Differences in Attitude to Ethical Shopping between Generations X, Y and Z

According to the research carried out, the representatives of Generation X in the supermajority rather exceptionally or even randomly (56%) take into account when making a purchase whether they can benefit someone (e.g. a non-profit organisation, fair-trade, charity organisation, general benefit purpose), which is in comparison with other generations, the highest value found (Y 52%, Z 55%). 17% of people in Generation X, 13% and 14% in Generation Z do not pay attention to these aspects at all. In the case of the group of respondents of Generation Z (17%), the largest group of consumers was recorded who, on the other hand, try to benefit other organisations in a targeted way when purchasing (Generation X 9%, Generation Y 15%).

Table 2. Testing the significance of differences among generations X, Y and Z in the case of the aspect of trying to benefit someone else by purchasing

	Chi-square	SV	p
Pearson chi-square	14.0864	df = 6	p = 0.0287
M-V chi-square	14.5264	df = 6	p = 0.0243
Contingency coefficient	0.1181		
Cramer's V	0.0841		

As seen in Table 2 above, the aspect of trying to benefit someone else by purchasing (i.e., taking into account other ethical aspects in addition to the purchase itself), a statistically significant ($p = 0.0287$) weak dependence ($C = 0.1181$) on belonging to Generations X, Y and Z was demonstrated with 95% confidence. The results thus confirmed that significantly fewer people of Generation X answered "targeted", significantly fewer people of Generation Y "often", significantly more people of Generation Z "often".

Generation X consumers are characterised by the fact that they clearly buy ethical products with the least intensity. In this group, only 26% of people behave this way when purchasing and consider ethical aspects directly or often when making decisions. In Generation Z, it is 41%, and in Generation Y, it is 37% of people. The figure for people who do not shop in this way at all is also the highest, it is 14%. To some extent, the positive fact is that only 7% of representatives of group Y and 6% of representatives of group Z do not buy in this way at all, which is only a fractional part. So, there was a big difference in the behaviour of individual generations.

61% of Generation X and 57% of consumers of Generation Y buy ethical products and services only rarely or randomly. The actual purchase of products/services that can be described as "ethical" is also mostly limited in the group of respondents of the Generation Z. 53% of consumers prefer these products, either exceptionally or randomly. There is, therefore, quite a lot of room for improvement with the use of communication tools.

The Covid 19 pandemic did not have a significant effect on representatives' approach to ethical shopping for any of the generations. Only 18% of Gen X consumers, 19% of Gen Y consumers, and 22% of Gen Z consumers reported some degree of influence, i.e., attitude changes. The rate of direct purchase of ethical products did not increase significantly with the monitored groups in connection with the waste in the Covid 19 pandemic. Thanks to the awareness of a broader context of the relationship between lifestyle and the impact on the environment, this situation had a positive effect on only 17% of consumers of Generation X, 19% of Generation Y and 21% of Generation Z.

Table 3. Testing the significance of differences among generations X, Y and Z in the case of the intensity of direct ethical products purchasing

	Chi-square	SV	p
Pearson chi-square	27.0590	df = 6	p < 0.001
M-V chi-square	27.4121	df = 6	p < 0.001
Contingency coefficient	0.1626		
Cramer's V	0.1165		

As shown in Table 3 above, in the case of the intensity of a direct purchase of ethical products, a statistically significant difference was demonstrated between Generation X, Y and Z. The intensity of a direct purchase of ethical products is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and weakly ($C = 0.1626$) influenced by belonging to Generations X, Y and Z.

The reason for Generation X for taking into account ethical values in the purchasing decision-making process is, in order of importance, the desire to help (39%), a sense of personal responsibility (27%), interest in ecology/environment (21%) or a combination of these interests. Compared to Generations Z and Y, this group has the most outstanding effort to help (chart 1). On the contrary, the reason why ethical principles are not reflected in the purchase choice is a lack of information (39%), lack of knowledge of ethical principles (30%), limited options for purchasing in the retail network (20%), and personal lack of interest (11%).

The main motivators for Gen Y consumers when shopping ethically are a sense of personal responsibility (39%), a desire to help (23%) and an interest in ecology/environment (22%). The most important reason why this group of respondents does not make ethical purchases is the lack of information (38%), ignorance of ethical principles (24%) and poor availability in the retail network (22%). A personal lack of interest was mentioned by 16% of respondents.

Among the reasons for people of Generation Z for which the ethical aspects of the purchase are relevant include a sense of personal responsibility (38%), an interest in ecology and the environment (24%) and an effort to help (21%). It is interesting that representatives of Generations Y and Z almost agree with the reasons for considering ethical values when

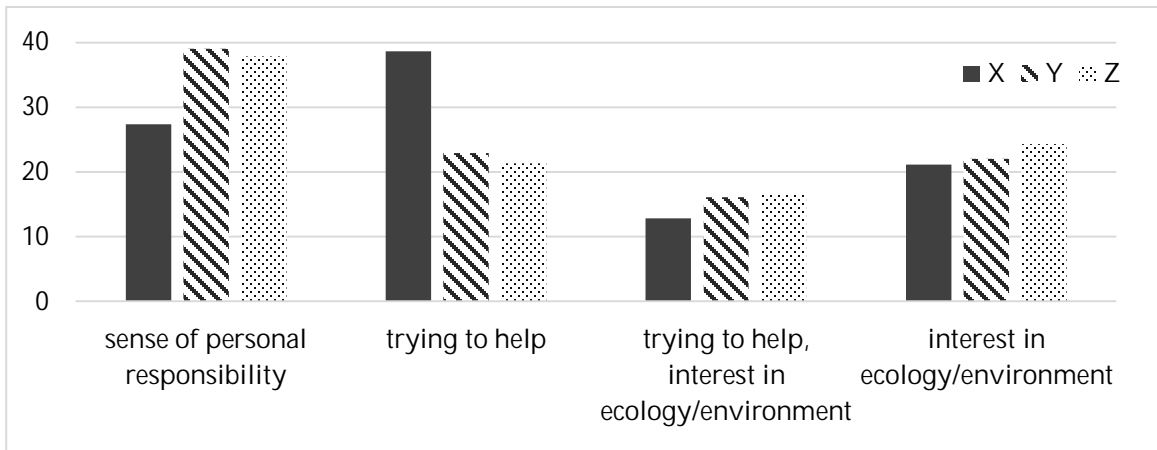


Figure 1. Differences in generations X, Y and Z in reasons for ethical products purchasing (%)

purchasing consumer goods and their importance. For this group, too, on the contrary, the main reason why consumers do not buy in this way is the lack of information (40%), limited availability (26%) and the lack of knowledge of ethical principles (21%). A personal lack of interest was stated by 14% of respondents.

The source of knowledge and information in the context of ethical values for the fifth consumers in the Generation Y (21%) is the press, television and various forms of printed publications. Only 12% of people actively and purposefully search for information at the same time (Figure 2). In this case, the findings are comparable to the characteristics of Generation X. This is a meagre number, which is essentially repeated at a similar level for all monitored groups (12% of Generation X and 14% of Generation Z). Of course, it cannot be expected that the issue of ethical values in shopping will be of equal interest to all shoppers. However, an increase in the number of active consumers can be achieved through proper communication.

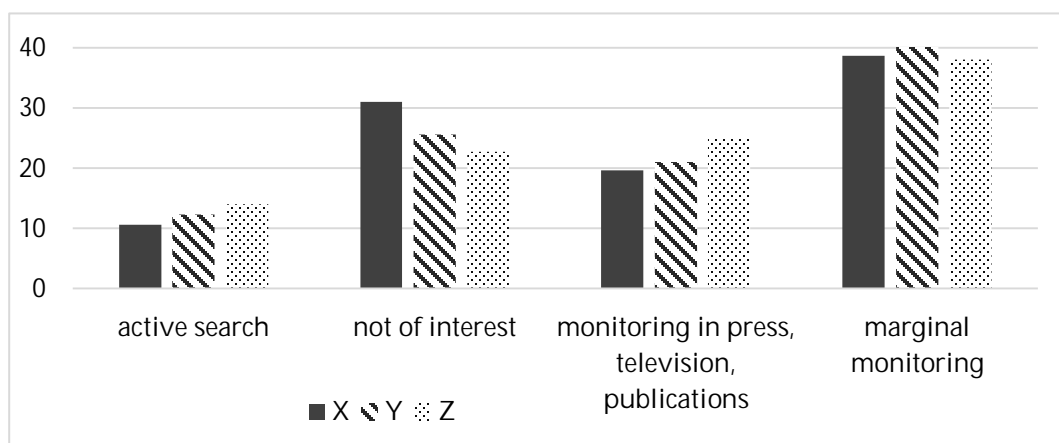


Figure 2. Differences in generations X, Y and Z in information monitoring in connection with ethical purchasing (%)

Generation X does not differ significantly in the ways of acquiring knowledge and information. Only with the fact that in this group of consumers, there is the largest percentage

of people who indicate that information with the character of ethical values is not of interest to them, namely 31% of people (Generation Y 26%, Generation Z 23%).

64% of consumers boycott products or services in the event of spreading information about, for example, violations of human rights, restrictions on the favourable living conditions of animals or major damage to the environment. However, information of this nature is not always available to the general public (as already mentioned, only about 11% of consumers actively search for information themselves). There is also room to improve consumer awareness towards transparent and non-damaging actions of, for example, manufacturing or trading companies and service providers. The most common reasons why consumers are willing to boycott products are ethical and humane aspects and ecological aspects or a combination of the above options across all generations. Therefore, consumers are aware of the importance of the responsible approach of companies and are willing to take it into consideration in their purchasing decisions.

Only a small proportion of Gen Xers are influenced in their decision-making by recommendations originating from YouTube (8%). For the vast majority, this channel is, therefore, not relevant. This generation is more likely to be influenced by other social networks. The influence of shared video recordings with the theme of ethical values and, with it, the influence of specific authors of these recordings on YouTube is not essential in the case of Generation Y. Only 15% of consumers are influenced to some extent by this channel. Therefore, it is possible to say that other forms of communication and other channels are more suitable for sharing and expanding the awareness of Generation Y's representatives about ethical shopping. 28% of representatives of Generation Z are at least partially influenced by YouTube spots. This can be used in marketing communication by targeting specific communication channels.

Table 4. Testing the significance of differences among generations X, Y and Z in the case of the influence of the recommendation for ethical purchasing via YouTube

	Chi-square	SV	p
Pearson chi-square	59.3078	df = 6	p < 0.001
M-V chi-square	59.4253	df = 6	p < 0.001
Contingency coefficient	0.2371		
Cramer's V	0.1726		

As seen from Table 4 above, a statistically significant dependence ($p < 0.001$) of the influence of recommendations for ethical shopping via YouTube on the generation and age of the respondents was demonstrated. Even in this case, the dependence can be characterised as weak ($C = 0.2371$).

4.2. *Ways of Communicating Sustainable Consumption*

The research found that in a number of characteristics related to the approach of representatives of individual groups, Generation Y and Z consumers are identical or very similar. Differences were noted in the approach of Generation X. These differences and the findings can be used in the communication of ethical values and ways in which representatives of these groups can be addressed. To design marketing communication as

effectively as possible and within the context of the conducted survey's findings, the following aspects can be recommended as an area of focus for Generation X:

- emphasising the aspect of help and personal responsibility,
- support, for example, awareness of ethical principles through various educational campaigns,
- support ethical and humane aspects of communication,
- strengthen the perception of the impact of decision-making on the environment,
- use elements of visual communication, work with brief messages.

It is said that one of the typical features of Generation Y is that they are generally not afraid of the new, as their childhood and adolescence were characterised by various changes. This is also possible to be used in marketing communication and appeal to the globally changing environmental conditions and the necessity of a change in behaviour towards an emphasis on ethical values. Considering the characteristics of Generation Y, a combination of different communication forms via television and the press with a stronger focus on media such as computers, tablets, and mobile phones can be recommended as the most suitable forms of communication. Communication through websites and blogs will also work very well with this generation. In the case of Generation Y, it is possible to recommend focusing on the following aspects in the context of the findings from the conducted research:

- to increase awareness of the possibilities of benefiting from the purchase decision to other persons/organisations,
- emphasise a sense of personal responsibility,
- promote awareness of the forms and principles of eco-friendly shopping,
- to make available information about ethical values related to the purchase of consumer goods in the form of news and reports on television and the press,
- improve consumer/general public awareness of the ways in which consumer goods are produced and sold in terms of unethical behaviour,
- emphasise impacts of purchasing and other behaviour on the environment.

As the survey showed, in the case of group Z, video content on YouTube channels can be an effective communication tool. From the perspective of marketing communication, in the case of Generation Z and within the context of the findings from the conducted survey, it is possible to recommend focusing on the following aspects:

- aspects of the impact of purchasing choices on the environment,
- appeal to a sense of personal responsibility and the support of ecology and the environment,
- promote awareness of forms of eco-friendly shopping,
- promote awareness of the principles of ethical purchasing,
- use social networks and mobile devices in communication,
- improve the availability of "ethical" products in the retail network,
- make brands and symbols that declare the relationship to the environment more visible,
- support the availability of information about unethical and inhumane products.

All three statistical hypotheses (H_{01} , H_{02} , H_{03}) were rejected in favour of alternative hypotheses:

- H_{A1} : Interest in the origin of goods depend on whether the consumer belongs to generation X, Y and Z (RQ1).
- H_{A2} : The frequency of buying ethical products depend on whether the consumer belongs to the X, Y and Z generation (RQ2).
- H_{A3} : The extent to which consumers are influenced by YouTubers when purchasing ethical products depend on the consumer's belonging to generation X, Y and Z (RQ3).

5. Discussion

There are numerous differences between generations in how Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z perceive the importance of sustainable consumption and how they project the influence of ethical considerations into their purchasing behaviour. Gen Xers are technologically savvy because they grew up with technology evolving throughout their lives. Therefore, Gen Xers are able to use computers, cell phones, laptops and other devices well (Costello, 2020). Gen Xers are shown to be shrewd pragmatists who focus on themselves rather than society (Boyd, 2010). Even so, in the case of Generation X, the research found that the most important reason for considering ethical values in the purchase decision-making process was the desire to help. Generation Y consumers are associated with a preference for environmentally friendly, socially responsible, and technologically advanced products. They are also known to be quick spenders and inclined to hedonistic consumption (López-Fernández, 2020). Generation Y is also very family oriented. Arli et al. (2019) report that Millennials' views on ethics are more relaxed than those of the previous Generation X. In contrast, the study by Curtin et al. (2001) found that ethical codes and expectations of Generation Y are high, which was also confirmed by the research conducted. The change in the perception of acceptable ethical behaviour is even more significant with Generation Z, as the results of a study (Barna, 2018) show. The morale of Generation Z has changed dramatically, and beliefs about moral relativism prevail. Members of Generation Z believe that changes in what is morally right and wrong are strongly influenced by society and depend on personal beliefs (Klopota et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

It is evident that in the case of marketing activities, it is not possible to approach all customers in the same way in order to achieve the optimal effect. Supporting the purchase of ecological products and the role of communication for sustainable consumption are two important prerequisites for the further development of ethical shopping. Marketing communication can be a very effective tool that can significantly promote general consumer awareness of ethical shopping principles and encourage consumers to make ethical purchases for their own consumption. Research has shown that Generation Y and Generation Z consumers are the same or very similar in a number of characteristics related to the attitudes of individual groups. Differences were recorded in the approach of Generation X.

These differences and findings can be used to communicate ethical values and ways to approach representatives of these groups. A further continuation of the research could be finding out differences in communication between generations in terms of, for example, the influence of gender or education.

Conflict of interest: none.

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