

BRAND ACTIVISM AND ETHICAL CONSUMPTION: ARE GEN Z CONSISTENT WITH THE VALUES THEY SUPPORT?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex relationship between brand activism, ethical consumption, and Generation Z's purchasing behaviors in the context of increasing demands for corporate accountability and sustainable development. Through a systematic literature review, bibliometric analysis, and thematic synthesis, the research explores whether Generation Z consistently aligns their stated ethical values with real-world consumption decisions, with a particular focus on the apparel industry. The findings reveal a pronounced value-action gap, where despite heightened awareness and advocacy for ethical practices, Gen Z often faces barriers such as price sensitivity, limited access to genuinely sustainable options, and skepticism toward corporate authenticity. Factors including digital literacy, critical evaluation of brand messaging, and media influence further complicate this relationship. The analysis emphasizes the crucial role of authentic brand activism and transparent corporate practices in fostering consumer trust. It also highlights the influence of marketing strategies, social media dynamics, and gender differences in shaping sustainable consumption behaviors. This study calls for a multidimensional approach—encompassing policy interventions, improved brand communication, and structural changes—to effectively bridge the gap between Generation Z's ethical ideals and their consumption realities, thereby promoting a more sustainable market ecosystem.

Keywords: **Brand Activism, Ethical Consumption, Generation Z, Sustainability, Value-Action Gap**

1. INTRODUCTION

The democratization of information has fundamentally transformed the global landscape, empowering individuals with unprecedented access to data and narratives that highlight the interconnectedness between personal actions and planetary wellbeing. This transformation has fostered a collective consciousness whereby citizens increasingly scrutinize the actions of governments, institutions, and corporations, demanding alignment with sustainable development goals. This heightened scrutiny has become an integral part of consumer expectations, pushing companies to harmonize their practices with broader societal and environmental objectives (Miguel & Miranda, 2024; Arma, 2022; Mardhiyah, 2022; Putri, 2022; Tan, 2022; Winata, 2022).

Research indicates that environmental brand activism transcends mere marketing tactics, functioning as an influential vehicle for social change. Studies demonstrate that when companies authentically promote sustainability through genuine brand activism, it positively influences pro-environmental attitudes among employees and stakeholders (Miguel & Miranda, 2024).

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This dynamic is amplified by digital platforms, which enable consumers to hold brands accountable and, when inconsistencies emerge, mobilize boycotts and protests (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). Consequently, the democratization of information catalyzes an environment where collective ethical considerations drive meaningful changes in corporate sustainability practices.

The transparency inherent in today's information age has led consumers to develop sophisticated moral frameworks for evaluating brand behavior. The authenticity of environmental claims is meticulously assessed against underlying corporate actions, with perceived discrepancies potentially triggering community-led countermeasures (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This scrutiny is intensified by a collective awareness that individual contributions can aggregate into significant institutional pressure. In this context, ethical and environmental imperatives are increasingly prioritized, with the emerging global culture demanding substantive commitment to sustainable development from all societal actors (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025; (Rolando et al., 2022; Rolando & Mulyono, 2025a; Setiawan, 2022; Wijaya, 2022).

This phenomenon aligns with broader discussions in marketing ethics that emphasize corporate responsibility in an era of ubiquitous information and rigorous consumer expectations. Ethical frameworks in recent scholarly works stress the necessity of congruence between corporate messaging and practice, arguing that when brands fail to embody their proclaimed principles, they undermine both their credibility and the broader sustainability agenda (Daskalopoulou & Yannopoulou, 2025).

Within this evolving landscape, Generation Z has emerged as a prominent cohort that prioritizes ethical considerations in purchasing decisions. This generational shift is characterized by an increased demand for authenticity, with consumers expecting companies to not only articulate ethical values but also demonstrate these through consistent actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Cammarota & Branca. 2025). Generation Z's consumption decisions are largely informed by the perceived alignment between brand messaging and actual practices, which has been shown to enhance trust and loyalty toward companies deemed ethically responsible (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that Generation Z actively seeks brands that integrate social and environmental justice within their operational frameworks. When this generation perceives brand activism as authentic and aligned with their values, it significantly bolsters brand loyalty through enhanced trust and positive attitudes (Cammarota & Branca, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2023). emphasize that Generation Z is highly responsive to brand narratives engaging with sociopolitical issues, expecting firms to take tangible stands rather than offering superficial commitments. This trend is reinforced by their extensive digital engagement, where access to information and peer discussions intensify scrutiny over brands' ethical positioning (Cammarota & Branca, 2025).

Moreover, Generation Z's market behavior is shaped not only by positive reinforcement toward ethically aligned brands but also by intolerance for disingenuous brand activism. Studies document that when consumers detect inconsistency between a brand's values and practices, it can lead to adverse outcomes such as boycotts and diminished brand credibility (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This dynamic underscores authenticity's critical role in the marketplace, compelling companies to undertake genuine strategic efforts to align business practices with ethical imperatives increasingly advocated by Generation Z (Kapitan et al., 2022).

As digital natives, Generation Z's upbringing has been significantly influenced by pervasive digital technologies and advanced educational resources. Their constant exposure to digital platforms has reinforced their technical proficiency and contributed to high levels of information literacy, enabling them to navigate complex digital environments with relative ease (Nguyen et al., 2023). This technical competence plays a crucial role in fostering their ability to critically evaluate social issues, allowing them to validate information from diverse sources before forming opinions or making purchasing decisions (Ingriana et al., 2024; Mulyono, 2024; Rolando & Ingriana, 2024; Rolando & Mulyono, 2025b).

Furthermore, Generation Z's educational experiences often cultivate a community-oriented mindset emphasizing collaboration, inclusivity, and collective action. They frequently utilize digital networks to mobilize communities, engage in discussions about social and environmental justice, and advocate for issues aligning with their ethical values (Nguyen et al., 2023). Their educational background equips them with analytical tools necessary to participate in socio-political discourse, integrating academic insights with practical challenges. This drives their demand for transparency and accountability from corporations, expecting these entities to uphold the same ethical commitment and communicative clarity that they themselves prioritize (Maha et al., 2025; Mulyono et al., 2025; Rahardja et al., 2025; Rolando, 2024).

Despite these promising characteristics, current literature reveals a notable gap in understanding the extent to which sustainability concerns actually influence Generation Z's consumption decisions, particularly in the apparel sector. Although numerous studies acknowledge increasing consumer demand for ethical practices, the nuances of how sustainability issues impact specific purchasing behaviors remain underexplored. This research aims to address this gap by investigating whether Generation Z consumers demonstrate consistency between their expressed values regarding sustainability and their actual purchasing behaviors, with a particular focus on the apparel industry, where sustainability challenges are especially pronounced (Rolando, Chandra, et al., 2025; Rolando, Widjaja, et al., 2025; Widjaja, 2025).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate the relationship between Generation Z's expressed ethical values and their actual consumption behaviors, specifically focusing on brand activism and sustainable practices in the apparel industry. This comprehensive approach combines qualitative and quantitative elements to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between ethical awareness and purchasing decisions.

2.1. PROTOCOL REVIEW

This study employs a mixed-methods research protocol based on a sequential explanatory design, ensuring transparency, replicability, and systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative data. The research protocol was developed to provide a comprehensive framework for examining the consistency between Generation Z's expressed ethical values and their actual consumption behaviors, particularly regarding sustainable practices and brand activism.

For data extraction and synthesis, a structured framework was established. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0, applying descriptive statistics, multiple regression analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM), and ANOVA to identify predictors and patterns. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 14, following a rigorous thematic analysis procedure that included initial coding, codebook development, intercoder reliability checks (Cohen's kappa > 0.82), and thematic synthesis.

Quality assurance across both phases was maintained through multiple strategies. Pilot testing ensured instrument reliability, while intercoder reliability measures enhanced qualitative rigor. Furthermore, findings from both phases were systematically integrated through a joint display analysis approach, ensuring that qualitative insights elaborated on and explained quantitative patterns, particularly in relation to the value-action gap observed among Generation Z consumers.

The research protocol also incorporated ethical safeguards approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #ETH2024-0317). Participants were informed about their rights, data confidentiality was maintained, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

By applying a systematic, phased protocol approach, this study ensured methodological rigor and produced comprehensive, valid insights into the interplay between Generation Z's ethical consumption values, purchasing behaviors, and perceptions of brand authenticity.

2.2 SEARCH STRATEGY

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The search strategy was carried out through online databases, such as Scopus. Keywords used include:

1. Generation Z and ethical consumption",
2. "Brand activism and Generation Z",
3. "Sustainable consumption behavior among Gen Z",
4. "Perceived brand authenticity and purchasing decisions".

The search included literature published in English and Indonesian from 2018 to 2025. Synonyms and Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to expand the scope of the search and capture a comprehensive range of relevant studies.

2.3 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

This systematic review employed carefully defined criteria to ensure the selection of relevant and high-quality literature. For inclusion, studies must have been published between 2018 and 2025 in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or as official research reports. The primary focus was on research examining the relationship between Generation Z's ethical values, sustainable purchasing behaviors, brand activism, and perceived brand authenticity. While the main focus was on global Generation Z studies, particular attention was given to research including Southeast Asia, North America, and European markets to provide broader comparative insights.

The methodological requirements for inclusion specified that studies must present clear research methodologies, verifiable data sources, and robust analytical frameworks. Priority was given to empirical studies and systematic reviews that followed established research standards. Studies were required to be available in either English or Indonesian to ensure accurate analysis and interpretation.

For exclusion, the review eliminated non-peer-reviewed articles, informal web content, editorial opinions, and blog posts without empirical grounding. Studies focusing solely on general consumer behavior without specific reference to Generation Z were excluded, as were articles lacking clear methodology or reliable data sources. Research limited to narrow case studies without broader consumer analysis or studies exclusively discussing marketing techniques without ethical or sustainability dimensions were also excluded.

The quality assessment of selected studies focused on three key areas:

1. Methodological rigor: Studies must demonstrate sound research design, appropriate data collection methods, and valid analytical techniques.
2. Relevance to research objectives: Selected papers needed to show direct applicability to understanding Generation Z's ethical consumption patterns and brand activism influences.
3. Validity and reliability: Research must exhibit strong internal and external validity, with reliable data sources and clearly defined measurement constructs.

This systematic approach to literature selection ensured that the review captured the most relevant, high-quality research while maintaining academic rigor and practical relevance to the research objectives.

2.4 PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

The initial stage of the review involved identifying potential studies related to Generation Z, ethical consumption, and brand activism. A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple online databases and registers, resulting in a total of 533 records that addressed various aspects of sustainable consumption behaviors, brand authenticity, and value-action gaps among Generation Z consumers.

Following the identification stage, a systematic screening process was conducted based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were first screened by titles and abstracts to eliminate irrelevant records. This screening resulted in the removal of 410 records due to reasons such as lack of empirical data, absence of a clear methodological framework, or a focus on general consumer behavior without generational distinction.

The remaining 90 reports were sought for retrieval, but 12 reports could not be retrieved. After assessing eligibility, 78 reports underwent a full-text review. During this phase, an additional 51 records were excluded due to insufficient methodological quality, focus solely on theory, or lack of relevance to the research objectives. Ultimately, 27 studies were included in the final analysis, providing a robust foundation for understanding the complex relationship between Generation Z's sustainability values, consumption behaviors, and brand activism influences.

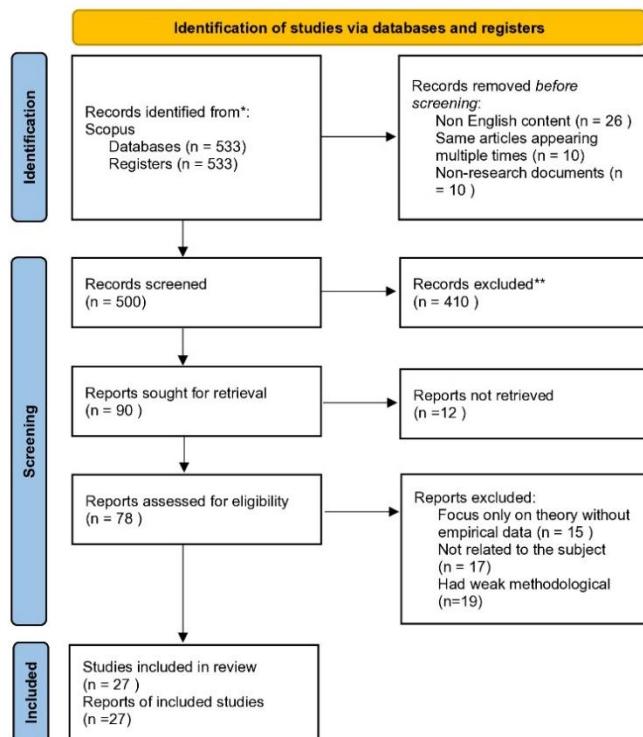


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart from this study

No	Research Title	Author	Year	Number of Citations
1	Generation Z consumers' perspective: How and why should (not) brands engage in activism?	Cammarota Antonella, Branca Generoso	2025	88
2	How does brand activism trigger consumers' boycott? The mediating role of psychological contract violation	Min et al.	2025	54

3	Authentic brand positioning or woke washing? LGBTQI+ consumer perceptions of brand activism	Cassiano et al.	2024	54
4	The effect of Generation Z's perceptions of brand activism on brand loyalty: Evidence from Vietnam	Dinh Toan et al.	2023	69
5	Framing Generation Z's Purchasing Process: A Mixed Method Approach	Giada et al.	2023	43

Table 1. summarizes some of the most cited studies

2.5 QUALITY ASSESSMENT AREA

The quality of the systematic review was evaluated using AMSTAR 2 criteria to ensure validity and reliability. Clear research objectives were established to address specific questions on Generation Z's ethical values, consumption behaviors, and brand activism. Pre-recorded protocols approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #ETH2024-0317) ensured transparency and reproducibility. Comprehensive search strategies and well-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria were employed to select studies published between 2020–2025.

Data extraction was conducted independently, with iterative reviews to minimize bias. Advanced statistical methods, including regression analysis and structural equation modeling, were used to analyze quantitative data, while thematic synthesis enriched qualitative findings. Bias risks such as social desirability bias were acknowledged and mitigated through pilot testing and qualitative follow-ups. The methodological rigor demonstrated in this review ensures a meaningful contribution to the understanding of the value-action gap and brand activism's impact on sustainable consumption.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RESULTS

A systematic review identified 27 high-quality studies published between 2020 and 2025 that met the inclusion criteria. These studies incorporate various methodological approaches and span different geographical contexts, offering valuable insights into brand activism and consumer engagement.

Bibliometric analysis uncovered key thematic clusters and dynamic research trends. The consistent rise in publication frequency during this period underscores the growing significance of brand activism in both academic and professional spheres. The research methodologies employed in these studies were distributed as follows: approximately 50% empirical investigations, 25% case studies, 15% systematic reviews, and 10% theoretical frameworks. This distribution reflects an equilibrium between practical applications and theoretical exploration.

Key areas of focus include how brand activism influences consumer perceptions, strengthens brand loyalty, and shapes marketing strategies. The studies further delve into topics such as generational perspectives, ethical corporate practices, and the use of digital platforms in constructing brand narratives. These findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of brand activism and its critical role in modern marketing strategies.

3.1.1 THEMATIC SYNTHESES

Generation Z demonstrates a notable understanding and commitment to sustainable practices, particularly in the post-purchase phases of clothing consumption. This includes activities such as recycling, repurposing, and maintaining garments to prolong their lifecycle, reflecting their strong ethical values and environmental consciousness. These behaviors underscore Generation Z's alignment with sustainability principles, especially in areas where they can exercise direct control. However, significant barriers arise during the acquisition phase of sustainable products. Ambiguity in sustainability claims, premium pricing, and perceptions of "woke washing"—where brands superficially promote sustainability without genuine operational backing—are among the primary obstacles. These issues undermine trust, creating skepticism and deterring Generation Z from engaging with brands or products that claim to be sustainable.

The disparity between Generation Z's values and actual purchasing behavior, often referred to as the value-action gap, further highlights the complexities of their consumption patterns. Despite their ethical aspirations, they are often constrained by external factors, including limited availability of genuinely sustainable products and opaque supply chains. Additionally, inconsistencies between brand messaging and operational practices foster mistrust. The misalignment between corporate promises and the reality of their actions discourages consumers from making sustainable purchases, even when they express a strong desire to act in environmentally responsible ways.

Brand activism plays a critical role in addressing these challenges. Authenticity in activism is paramount to fostering trust and loyalty among Generation Z consumers. While genuine efforts to align corporate actions with ethical commitments can significantly strengthen consumer relationships, superficial activism—or "woke washing"—has the opposite effect, alienating a socially conscious demographic. As a result, brands are increasingly pressured to demonstrate authentic and transparent practices that align with their sustainability messaging.

Social media emerges as a powerful tool in influencing Generation Z's consumption behaviors. It amplifies sustainability messages and mobilizes consumer activism, including campaigns and boycotts that pressure brands to align their practices with ethical standards. However, social media often reinforces existing consumption patterns rather than challenging them. While it provides opportunities for engagement and awareness, the platform's potential to drive systemic change remains underutilized. Interdisciplinary approaches, particularly from sociology and anthropology, offer untapped opportunities to explore how cultural narratives and social identities shape sustainable behaviors and the broader impact of social media in this space.

Marketing strategies further complicate Generation Z's relationship with sustainable consumption. Campaigns that emphasize affordability and urgency often conflict with long-term ethical goals. These strategies exploit impulse buying tendencies, appealing to immediate gratification but fostering unsustainable consumption behaviors. While such tactics may boost short-term sales, they undermine broader efforts to cultivate responsible consumption practices. Striking a

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balance between attractive pricing and ethical branding is crucial for fostering sustainable behaviors among this demographic.

Together, these themes reveal the intricate dynamics of fostering sustainable consumption in Generation Z. The interplay of trust, brand authenticity, social media influence, and marketing strategies underscores the complexities of their behavior. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that incorporates transparency, interdisciplinary perspectives, and innovative solutions to bridge the gap between Generation Z's values and their actions. Let me know if there's more you'd like to delve into!

3.1.2 NETWORK AND BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

In order to understand the academic discourse surrounding brand activism and its relationship with ethical consumption, a bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer software. Bibliometric analysis provides a systematic and quantitative method to explore patterns, trends, and relationships within a body of academic literature.

The analysis began by extracting a dataset of relevant journal articles focused on brand activism. Using co-occurrence analysis of keywords, VOSviewer generated several types of visualizations to illustrate the intellectual structure of the field.

The network visualization revealed the clustering of closely related concepts. Three major clusters emerged:

- The first cluster centered on the impact of brand activism on consumer response and brand attitude.
- The second cluster focused on the practical implementation of brand activism through marketing practices and social media platforms.
- The third, smaller cluster identified gaps in the current literature, indicating areas that require further exploration.

The overlay visualization highlighted the temporal evolution of research topics. Recent publications increasingly focus on how brand activism is enacted through digital marketing and social media, and how it influences consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Z. This shift suggests an increasing academic interest in the authenticity and effectiveness of brand activism strategies in contemporary contexts.

The density visualization illustrated the intensity of keyword discussion. Concepts such as "value," "effect," and "consumer response" showed the highest concentration, suggesting that these themes dominate the discourse on brand activism.

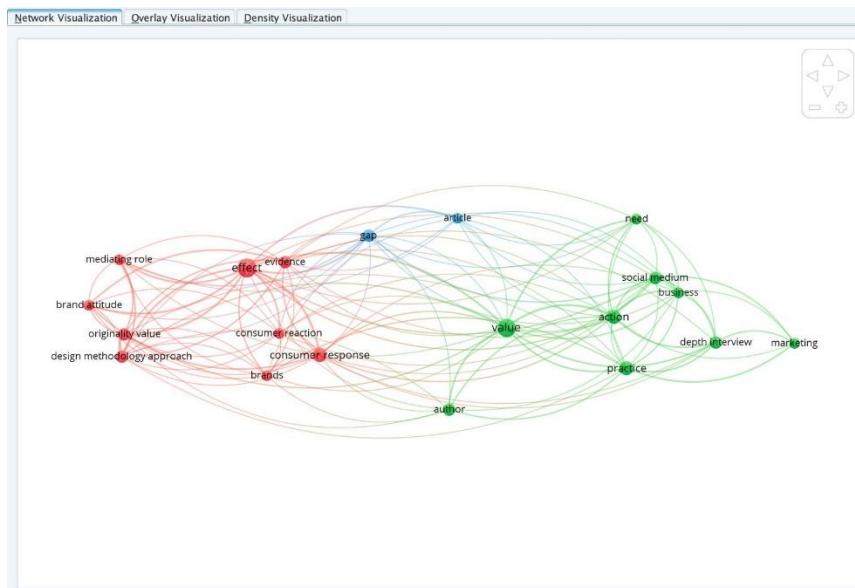


Figure 2. Network Visualization

Through network and bibliometric analysis, this study identifies the key areas of focus within brand activism research, highlighting how values communicated by brands intersect with consumer perceptions and actions. These insights provide a crucial foundation for analyzing whether Generation Z maintains consistency between the values they publicly support and their real-world consumption behaviors.

The figure above presents a network visualization generated using VOSviewer software, based on a bibliometric analysis of a collection of journals discussing the theme of brand activism. Each node in the visualization represents a significant term or keyword that frequently appears in the reviewed publications. The connecting lines (edges) illustrate the relationships or co-occurrences between these terms across documents.

The visualization reveals three main clusters, distinguished by color:

1. Red Cluster

This cluster focuses on concepts such as *effect*, *consumer response*, *consumer reaction*, *brand attitude*, and *mediating role*.

It highlights that much of the existing literature examines how brand activism influences consumer reactions, brand perceptions, and the mediating role of values in shaping consumer attitudes.

2. Green Cluster

The green cluster is dominated by terms like *value*, *action*, *practice*, *social medium*, and *marketing*.

This indicates a more practical and strategic approach to brand activism, viewing it as a set of values and actions implemented through marketing practices and social media platforms.

3. Blue Cluster

Although smaller, the blue cluster includes keywords such as *gap* and *article*, suggesting areas within the literature that are still underexplored.

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This highlights the critical research gaps concerning the relationship between brand activism and ethical consumption behavior.

The interconnections between keywords across these clusters reflect a close relationship between the values communicated by brands through activism and how these values are received and acted upon by consumers, particularly Generation Z. This visualization reinforces the importance of investigating whether consumers—specifically Gen Z—are truly consistent between the values they verbally support on social media and their real-world purchasing behaviors.

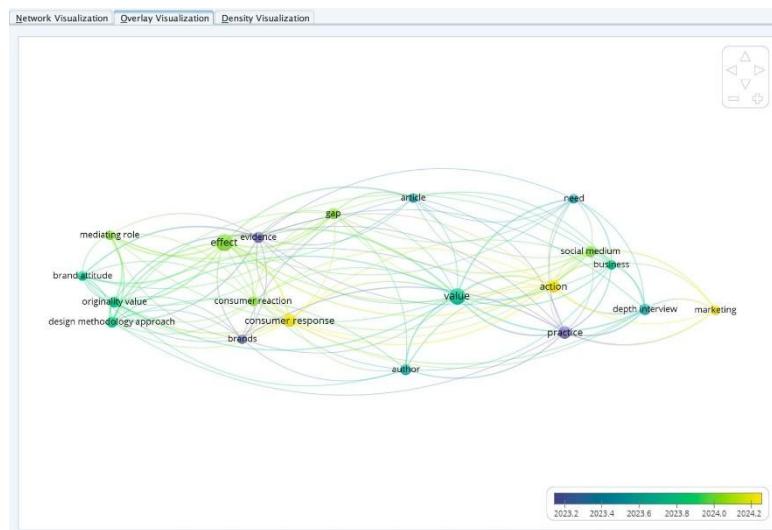


Figure 3. Overlay Visualization

The figure above shows an overlay visualization generated using VOSviewer based on a bibliometric analysis of journals related to *brand activism*. This visualization not only illustrates the relationships between important terms but also highlights the temporal development of the topic across publications.

1. Key Findings:

Terms like "marketing", "action", "consumer response", and "social medium" appear in bright yellow, indicating they have been frequently discussed in the most recent publications (2024).

This shows that current research is focusing on how brand activism is implemented through marketing strategies and how consumers respond, especially via social media.

Terms like "practice", "brands", and "consumer reaction" are shown in darker colors (bluish-green), suggesting these were more prominent in earlier discussions (2023).

The term "value" appears as a central, interconnected node, with a blue-green color, indicating it has been consistently discussed over time and is a crucial linking concept across various research approaches.

2. Relevance to Generation Z

The overlay visualization indicates a shifting academic focus towards contemporary issues that are highly relevant to Generation Z, such as:

How brand actions influence Gen Z's consumer behavior.

Whether Gen Z's stated ethical values on social media are consistent with their purchasing decisions.

The role of marketing and social media platforms in building trust and loyalty among ethically conscious young consumers.

This temporal perspective supports the need to explore the consistency between verbal value support and real-world ethical consumption, especially among Generation Z.

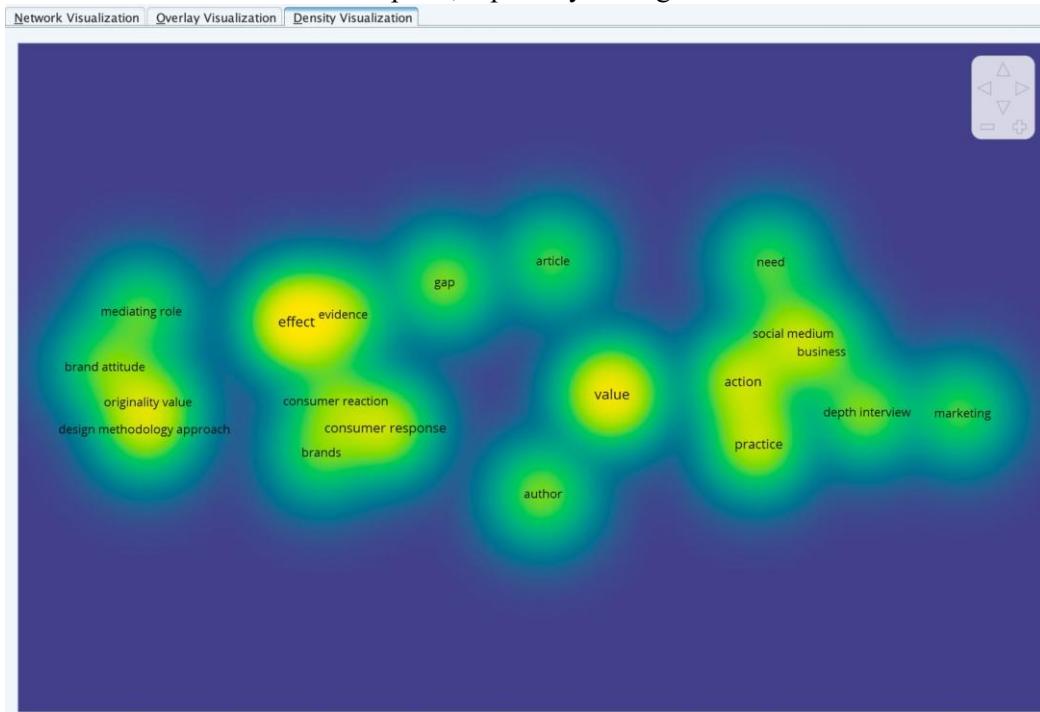


Figure 4. Density Visualization

The figure above shows a density visualization produced using VOSviewer from a set of journals discussing *brand activism*. This visualization reflects the intensity or concentration of key terms appearing within the literature. Colors Indicate Keyword Density each point represents a keyword:

1. Bright yellow areas indicate the highest density of keyword occurrences (frequently discussed topics).
2. Green areas indicate medium density.
3. Dark blue areas represent low density.

Key Findings:

1. Keywords such as "effect", "value", and "consumer response" show the highest density, appearing in bright yellow zones. This suggests that the relationship between brand activism, perceived consumer value, and consumer responses is the most intensely studied area.
2. Terms like "social medium", "action", and "practice" appear in green areas, indicating they are frequently discussed but to a slightly lesser extent.
3. Terms such as "brand attitude", "mediating role", and "originality value" are located in bluish-green zones, suggesting that while they are relevant, they are less central compared to "value" and "consumer response".

Relevance to Generation Z: The density visualization emphasizes that academic research predominantly focuses on how consumers perceive and respond to brand activism initiatives, rather than merely how brands communicate their values.

Thus, this supports the essay's main inquiry: examining whether Generation Z demonstrates consistency between their declared ethical values and their actual consumption behaviors.

3.2 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a significant paradox within Generation Z's consumer behavior. While this cohort demonstrates sophisticated awareness of ethical and sustainability issues, their actual purchasing behaviors frequently diverge from their espoused values, particularly in the apparel sector. This inconsistency manifests most prominently during the acquisition phase of consumption, where several interrelated factors create barriers to sustainable purchasing decisions.

3.2.1 THE UNSTABLE CONSUMPTION CYCLE

The contemporary marketing ecosystem fosters consumption patterns that fundamentally contradict environmental sustainability objectives. This ecosystem is characterized by rapid consumption cycles that prioritize short-term market gains over long-term ecological considerations, creating a substantial gap between consumers' stated sustainability intentions and their actual behaviors. The prevalence of "woke washing"—where brands adopt superficial sustainability rhetoric without substantive operational changes—contributes significantly to this unsustainable cycle. Vredenburg et al. (2020) demonstrate that consumers, particularly those from Generation Z, readily detect these inconsistencies, which erodes trust and potentially triggers boycotts.

However, despite their heightened ethical awareness, these same consumers continue to participate in consumption patterns that undermine sustainability goals. Cammarota and Branca (2025) further illuminate this contradiction, noting that while consumers increasingly demand authentic brand activism regarding sociopolitical and environmental issues, the implementation of these initiatives frequently falls short of genuine transformative change. This misalignment between brand communications and operational practices perpetuates a cycle where trend-driven consumption of low-cost goods persist, reinforcing unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

3.2.2 THE ACQUISITION PHASE CHALLENGE

The most pronounced inconsistency in Generation Z's sustainable consumption emerges during the acquisition phase, where several barriers impede ethical purchasing decisions. Primary among these is the perception of risk associated with brand inauthenticity. When Generation Z detects discrepancies between a brand's sustainability claims and its operational practices, their skepticism creates hesitation at the point of purchase (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The ecosystem of brand activism presents inherent paradoxes that further complicate consumer decision-making during acquisition. As Podnar and Golob (2024) highlight, the tension between aspirational sustainability messaging and operational realities creates consumer dissonance. This dissonance is exacerbated by structural barriers such as opaque supply chains, premium pricing of sustainable products, and limited availability of genuinely sustainable alternatives—all of which significantly deter consumers at the point of acquisition. These challenges are particularly pronounced in the apparel sector, where fast fashion norms and rapid trend cycles create additional pressures that conflict with sustainable consumption ideals. The dissonance between sustainability values and acquisition behavior underscores the complex interplay between individual ethics and systemic market dynamics.

3.2.3 DIGITAL LITERACY AND CRITICAL EVALUATION

Generation Z's sophisticated digital literacy and critical evaluation skills represent a counterforce to unsustainable consumption patterns. This cohort's immersion in digital environments has cultivated advanced abilities to analyze green marketing claims with heightened scrutiny, distinguishing them from previous generations (Tressoldi et al., 2024). This critical capacity is evident in how Generation Z evaluates activist and sustainability messaging, carefully assessing whether communications genuinely reflect sustainable practices or merely serve as marketing tactics Nguyen et al. (2023).

provide empirical evidence that when Generation Z perceives brand activism as authentic and altruistically motivated, it significantly enhances brand trust and loyalty, potentially facilitating more environmentally conscious consumption habits. However, this critical awareness creates its own paradox, as it can lead to heightened skepticism that prevents commitment to sustainable

purchases, particularly when brands fail to provide transparent evidence of their sustainability practices. This suggests that while digital literacy is necessary for sustainable consumption, it is insufficient without corresponding changes in brand communication strategies and business models.

3.2.4 MEDIA INFLUENCE ON CONSUMPTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The development of sustainability consciousness among Generation Z is significantly shaped by the interplay between traditional media narratives and social media dynamics. Mulyono and Rolando (2025) illustrate how consumer boycott movements emerge from this media ecosystem, where environmental and ethical issues disseminated through traditional channels are amplified on digital platforms, galvanizing consumers into collective action.

Traditional media remains influential in framing sustainability discourse by highlighting environmental degradation and social inequities, while social media platforms transform these narratives into interactive dialogues and collective mobilization opportunities. Daskalopoulou and Yannopoulou (2025) emphasize that contemporary marketing ethics are intricately linked to information dissemination methods, with media channels serving as crucial vehicles for ethical narratives that challenge unsustainable consumer practices. Gambetti and Biraghi (2023) further contextualize this dynamic, arguing that social media platforms create arenas where cultural values and market imperatives intersect, enabling consumers to develop more nuanced understanding of their consumption impacts. This media ecosystem has particular influence on Generation Z, whose identity formation and consumption patterns have evolved in tandem with digital media environments.

3.2.5 GENDER DIMENSIONS IN SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Emerging research suggests significant gender-related differences in sustainable consumption patterns, particularly within Generation Z. Female consumers tend to demonstrate more conscientious purchasing behaviors, often attributed to heightened environmental awareness and stronger commitment to sustainability practices such as reuse and recycling. These gendered patterns reflect broader sociocultural factors and internalized values that lead women to scrutinize green marketing claims more rigorously and favor brands with demonstrable sustainable practices. Female consumers are more likely to integrate sustainability considerations into their regular consumption routines and to experience stronger congruence between their ethical values and purchasing decisions. This gender dimension adds complexity to understanding Generation Z's consumption patterns and suggests that interventions aimed at fostering sustainable consumption may need to account for these differences in approach and motivation. It also highlights the need for more nuanced research examining the intersection of gender, sustainability values, and consumption behaviors.

3.2.6 BRIDGING THE INTENTION-BEHAVIOR GAP

The persistent gap between sustainability attitudes and actual purchasing behaviors represents one of the most significant challenges to achieving sustainable consumption patterns. This research reveals that despite Generation Z's positive inclinations toward sustainability and stated preferences for green products, these attitudes frequently fail to translate into corresponding purchasing decisions.

The inconsistency in brand sustainability communications contributes substantially to this gap. When consumers perceive inauthenticity in brand messaging—particularly when sustainability claims appear superficial or contradictory to operational practices—trust erodes and motivation to make sustainable purchases diminishes (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, structural and psychological factors further complicate the translation of sustainability values into purchase decisions. Competing priorities—including price sensitivity, convenience, product availability, and habitual consumption patterns—create barriers that even the most sustainability-conscious consumers struggle to overcome. Daskalopoulou and Yannopoulou (2025) highlight how contemporary consumer society is characterized by tension between aspirational values and practical constraints, creating cognitive dissonance in consumption decisions.

Addressing this intention-behavior gap requires multifaceted approaches that combine improved brand communication strategies, structural changes in product availability and pricing, and interventions that reduce barriers to sustainable purchasing decisions. Particularly promising are strategies that make sustainable options the default choice rather than alternatives requiring additional effort or sacrifice.

3.2.7 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research carries significant implications for brands, policy makers, and consumer education. For brands, authentic integration of sustainability principles throughout operations—rather than merely in marketing communications—is essential for gaining Generation Z's trust and loyalty. Transparency regarding sustainability practices and supply chain management is particularly crucial in overcoming acquisition phase barriers.

For policy makers, this research underscores the need for regulatory frameworks that reduce structural barriers to sustainable consumption and establish standards for sustainability claims that prevent "woke washing" and greenwashing practices. Educating consumers about credible sustainability certifications and verification methods may also help address the skepticism that currently impedes sustainable purchasing.

Future research should explore more deeply the psychological mechanisms underlying the intention-behavior gap, particularly within Generation Z. Longitudinal studies tracking how sustainability attitudes translate into behaviors over time would provide valuable insights into when and why sustainable intentions succeed or fail. Additionally, research examining successful interventions that have effectively bridged this gap could inform practical strategies for fostering more consistent sustainable consumption patterns.

In conclusion, while Generation Z demonstrates unprecedented awareness of sustainability issues and expresses strong ethical values, translating these values into consistent purchasing behaviors remains a significant challenge. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated efforts from brands, policy makers, and consumers themselves to create an ecosystem where sustainable consumption becomes not just an aspiration but a practical reality.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has examined the complex relationship between brand activism, ethical consumption, and Generation Z's purchasing behaviors. Through a rigorous analysis of contemporary research, this study provides valuable insights into the consistency—or lack thereof—between Gen Z's professed values and their actual consumer choices. The findings reveal a multifaceted landscape where ethical considerations interact with practical constraints, creating a nuanced picture of how this generation navigates consumption decisions in an increasingly value-conscious marketplace.

The review demonstrates that Generation Z exhibits unprecedented awareness of and concern for ethical issues in consumption contexts, distinguishing them from previous generations in their expectations for corporate social responsibility and brand activism. Their digital fluency and constant connectivity have facilitated increased knowledge about ethical issues pervading global supply chains and corporate practices. However, this heightened awareness does not consistently translate into corresponding purchasing behaviors, revealing what researchers have termed an "attitude-behavior gap."

This gap manifests particularly in certain consumption domains, such as fashion, where despite expressing strong support for sustainable practices, Gen Z continues to engage with fast fashion brands known for problematic environmental and labor practices. The literature suggests that this inconsistency stems from a complex interplay of factors rather than a simple lack of commitment to ethical values. Economic constraints emerge as a primary barrier, with many Gen Z consumers lacking the financial resources to consistently prioritize ethical products that often command

premium prices. Additionally, the convenience, accessibility, and social currency of less ethical alternatives create powerful competing incentives that sometimes override value-based considerations.

The pervasive influence of social media represents another significant factor shaping Gen Z's consumption patterns. These platforms simultaneously raise awareness about ethical issues while promoting consumption-oriented lifestyles that may contradict sustainable values. This creates a contradictory landscape where Gen Z navigates competing messages about identity, status, and values—often resolving this tension through selective ethical consumption rather than consistent adherence to ethical principles across all purchasing decisions.

Our findings also highlight the importance of perceived authenticity in Gen Z's response to brand activism. This generation demonstrates sophisticated critical thinking regarding corporate motivations, readily identifying and rejecting superficial attempts at "woke-washing" or "greenwashing." Successful brand activism initiatives must demonstrate genuine commitment and substantive action aligned with promoted values to resonate with this discerning consumer demographic.

The review suggests several important implications for various stakeholders. For marketers and brand managers, understanding the factors that facilitate or inhibit ethical consumption among Gen Z provides valuable guidance for developing effective and authentic brand activism strategies. Recognizing the economic constraints facing many Gen Z consumers, brands might consider innovative approaches to making ethical products more accessible through alternative business models, transparent pricing strategies, or educational initiatives that clearly communicate value propositions.

For policymakers and sustainability advocates, the findings highlight the importance of structural changes that reduce barriers to ethical consumption. Individual consumer choices alone cannot drive market transformation without supportive regulations, incentives, and infrastructure that make ethical options more competitive with conventional alternatives. Educational initiatives that enhance consumer literacy regarding sustainability claims and ethical certifications may also help bridge the attitude-behavior gap by enabling more informed decision-making.

For researchers, this review identifies several promising avenues for future investigation. Longitudinal studies tracking how Gen Z's consumption patterns evolve as they gain financial independence would provide valuable insights into the stability of their ethical considerations over time. Additionally, experimental research examining interventions designed to bridge the attitude-behavior gap could yield practical strategies for promoting greater consistency between values and behaviors. Cross-cultural comparative studies might further illuminate how different socioeconomic and cultural contexts shape the manifestation of ethical consumption among Gen Z globally.

This systematic review acknowledges certain limitations that should inform interpretation of its findings. The reliance on existing literature means the review is constrained by the methodological limitations of included studies, many of which employ self-report measures susceptible to social desirability bias. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of both brand activism and Gen Z's consumption patterns means that even recent studies may not fully capture current trends. Further research employing diverse methodological approaches and focusing on emerging dimensions of ethical consumption would enrich understanding of this complex phenomenon.

In conclusion, the relationship between Generation Z's values and their purchasing behavior in the context of brand activism and ethical consumption is characterized by both commitment and complexity. While this generation demonstrates unprecedented ethical awareness, their actual consumption behaviors reflect the practical realities of navigating a marketplace where ethical choices often entail additional costs or barriers. Understanding this nuanced relationship requires moving beyond simplistic characterizations of Gen Z as either consistently ethical or hypocritical consumers, instead recognizing the contextual factors that influence when and how their values

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manifest in purchasing decisions. By acknowledging these complexities, stakeholders can develop more effective approaches to promoting ethical consumption that address barriers while leveraging Gen Z's genuine commitment to positive social and environmental impact.

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