

The Trap of Pseudo-Sustainability: Understanding Gen Z's Preception of Green Labels in Marketing

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Abstract

In this era of sustainability-oriented marketing, many companies are increasingly using “green” labels to attract environmentally conscious consumers. However, not all of these claims are in line with true sustainability practices, giving rise to the phenomenon of pseudo-sustainability. This study aims to analyze Generation Z's perceptions of green labels and investigate how these perceptions can influence consumer trust and purchasing behavior. This research uses a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews with 30 respondents aged 17–27 years. The interviews focus on three main dimensions: awareness of environmental and sustainability issues, interpretation and implementation of green labels, and skepticism towards greenwashing. The results show that Generation Z is interested in eco-friendly labeled products but remains critical of the discrepancy between marketing claims and actual environmental performance, and considers several other factors such as price and quality. This study also shows that the effectiveness of green labels among Generation Z as consumers depends more on brand transparency and honesty than on the symbolic images on the packaging.

Keywords: Sustainability; Greenwashing; Generation Z; Green Labels; Marketing Claims.

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INTRODUCTION

Increased environmental concerns are prompting consumers to reevaluate how they choose products. Discussions about plastic pollution, carbon emissions, and excessive consumption are becoming more frequent. These changes require companies to offer more responsible products. Green labels, environmentally friendly quality, and consumer awareness play an important role in purchasing decisions. Previous studies explain that green awareness, eco labels, and eco brands can influence people's purchasing behavior in the context of products with green label claims. This can be seen in the finding that consumers who understand environmental issues are more likely to support environmentally friendly products. These results are shown in research on green awareness, eco labels, and eco brands that have a significant effect on consumer purchasing behavior (Utami et al., 2024). Another study explains that knowledge of ecolabels can increase the intention to purchase green products in various countries, including Indonesia (Vinet & Zhedanov, 2011). In addition, green quality has also been proven to encourage the purchasing intentions of environmentally conscious consumers (Novita & Husna, 2020).

The phenomenon that occurs is that many green labels are not supported by sustainable practices. This phenomenon reduces consumer trust. Generation Z is concerned about environmental issues, but faces difficulties in distinguishing genuine green claims from symbolic claims. Pseudo-sustainability makes consumers doubt the intentions of companies and affects their purchasing behavior.

The limitations of this study include a focus on Generation Z exposed to products with green claims, discussing consumer perceptions rather than conducting corporate environmental audits, and using data from respondents who have seen, read, or purchased green-labeled products, with an age range limited to Generation Z aged 17–27 years.

This study uses a qualitative approach, with data obtained through in-depth interviews with approximately 15 Generation Z respondents. The research focuses on perceptions of green labels, levels of trust, and purchase intentions, which are then analyzed descriptively to understand the patterns of assessment and experiences of the respondents.

Literature Review

Sustainability is a concept that emphasizes the need to maintain a balance between economic, environmental, and social needs both now and in the future (Gunawan, 2025). In this context, various parties are required to consider the long-term impact of every decision made to ensure environmental sustainability and quality of life for humans.

The development of sustainability issues has also encouraged the emergence of green marketing as a marketing approach that focuses on products or practices that are considered environmentally friendly. According to the American Marketing Association, green marketing is not only related to product promotion but also covers the entire marketing process that emphasizes environmental attributes. Along with technological advances and digital transformation, green marketing practices are further strengthened by companies' ability to communicate more transparently and educationally about the environmental impact of their products (Sani).

One of the tools widely used in green marketing practices is eco-labeling. Eco-labeling is a mark or certification given to products as proof that they meet certain standards related to environmental friendliness (Kurniawan et al., 2024). The use of eco-labels has evolved into an important strategy for companies to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability. This is believed to build consumer trust, enhance company credibility, and send a positive signal about the ecological impact of products (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

Eco-labeling cannot always be a tool that can only foster consumer confidence in a product. Eco-labeling is also often used as a tool to attract consumers without clear compliance with the impact on the environment itself. Therefore, there needs to be a clear distinction between eco-labeling that is essentially useful for its original purpose, namely authentic sustainability, and eco-labeling that has a more deviant purpose and leads to

pseudo-sustainability, commonly known as greenwashing. To ensure the credibility of eco-labeling, it is important to consider the aspects of certification, transparency, and the life cycle created by the company when creating the labeling on the products they produce. The first example is certification, where a green product or one with eco-labeling must have credible, internationally standardized third-party certification. This can also be proven by companies complying with ISO 14020, which specifically mentions international standards in environmental labeling and declarations. Transparency is achieved when companies provide information on the supply chain and the impact of the products they produce on the environment itself. Finally, the life cycle involves companies providing information on the production process of a product, from raw materials to waste, and this information must be published widely to the public. Therefore, these three aspects distinguish between eco-labeling that truly has authentic sustainability goals and eco-labeling that is only for superficial sustainability.

However, the increasing use of environmentally friendly elements in marketing has also led to the emergence of greenwashing practices. Greenwashing occurs when companies make misleading claims, labels, or communications in order to create an image that their products or practices are more environmentally friendly than they actually are. This practice not only damages consumer trust in the company, but can also trigger the emergence of green skepticism more broadly. Green skepticism makes consumers doubt the authenticity of companies' eco-friendly claims, and ultimately can reduce their interest in buying green products, even when the claims are actually valid (Kreczmańska-Gigol & Gigol, 2022).

In the context of purchasing decisions, research shows that the more environmentally conscious a consumer is, the more likely they are to engage in green purchasing. The global environmental crisis has made consumers increasingly consider the ecological impact of the products they buy, putting pressure on companies to implement ethical marketing strategies that are in line with sustainability values (Vinet & Zhedanov, 2011). However, the phenomenon of green skepticism arising from greenwashing can hinder the effectiveness of green marketing and reduce consumer interest in purchasing environmentally friendly products.

Generation Z is an interesting consumer group in green marketing studies because they are known to have a high level of awareness of environmental issues. However, research shows that in practice, Generation Z often prioritizes price, convenience, and product quality over sustainability. Price sensitivity makes them less willing to pay a premium for green products, especially when they feel that environmentally friendly products do not show significant quality differentiation compared to conventional products (Gomes et al., 2023). This condition shows that despite high environmental awareness, Generation Z's purchasing decisions are still influenced by perceived product value, not solely by sustainability drivers.

This study integrates these diverse concepts which are green marketing, eco-labeling, green skepticism, and the attitude-behavior gap into a single conceptual framework to examine the phenomenon of pseudo-sustainability. Within this framework, green awareness and eco-labels act as initial drivers, while skepticism and price sensitivity function as significant barriers that moderate the relationship between environmental attitudes and actual purchasing behavior. By positioning the study within this integrated model, it provides a comprehensive lens to analyze how Generation Z navigates the tension between their sustainability ideals and the reality of misleading marketing claims, ultimately shaping their trust and final consumption choices.

METHOD

Research Approach and Strategy

This study uses a Qualitative Approach with a Case Study Strategy. The qualitative approach was chosen because the main focus of the study is to gain an in-depth (descriptive and interpretative) understanding of Generation Z's perceptions, attitudes,

behaviors, and skepticism toward green claims and labels in the context of marketing, which is a complex social phenomenon that requires meaning exploration.

The case study strategy was applied to analyze the phenomenon of Pseudo-Sustainability through the specific experiences of Gen Z respondents. This strategy is highly appropriate because it allows researchers to comprehensively examine four core dimensions, namely Awareness, Attitudes, Consumption Behavior, and Skepticism in a relevant market context.

Research Participants

The key participants in this study are Generation Z who are active consumers. Participants will provide in-depth insights into the variables being studied, ranging from conceptual understanding to reactions to greenwashing as a form of pseudo-sustainability.

Sampling Technique

The technique used is Purposive Sampling. Sample selection is based on the explicit objective of the study, which is to obtain rich information from individuals who are most relevant to the issue being studied (31).

The inclusion criteria for participants were determined to ensure that the data collected could answer all dimensions of the questions in the instrument:

- Belong to Generation Z (aged 17–27 years);
- Are active consumers of everyday products;
- Are aware of environmental issues.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be collected through Semi-Structured Interviews. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to ask questions in the instrument while still providing space for participants to elaborate and provide personal context (Given, 2012).

The interviews will focus on four key variables in the instrument:

Table 1. Variables, Indicators, and Measurement Items

Variables	Indicators	Questions
Gen Z's Awareness of Green Marketing	How Subjects (Gen Zs) Understanding The Concept of Green Marketing	How often do you hear or read information about environmental issues such as climate change or plastic waste? Does this affect how you choose your everyday products? How familiar are you with terms like eco-label, green-labeled products, environmental labeling, etc?
Attitudes Towards Green Marketing	How Subjects (Gen Z's) perception of a certain benefit	When comparing conventional products with products that are made to be more environmentally friendly, which type of product do you think is better and why?
Gen Z's Behaviour of Consumption Upon Green Marketing	The Influence of Green Marketing to Subjects (Gen Zs) Purchase Decision	If you were faced with a choice between environmentally friendly products and conventional products that are cheaper, which would you tend to choose and what would be your main reason?
Gen Z's Skepticism	Perception and Skepticism Towards	In your opinion, are all products with green labels truly environmentally friendly?

Variables	Indicators	Questions
Towards Greenwashing (Pseudo-Sustainability)	Greenwashing and how Gen Z reacts to Pseudonymity of Sustainability	If you find out that a brand you like has been proven to be greenwashing (making false environmental claims), how does that affect your trust and future actions towards that brand?

Documentation will be carried out through audio recording and field notes to ensure data accuracy.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data obtained from interviews will be analyzed using Thematic Analysis. This approach is well suited for processing qualitative data based on semi-structured interviews, which focus on understanding the views, experiences, and perceptions of subjects (Adams, 2015).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 respondents (aged 17-27), this study identifies four main variables that describe the behavior of young consumers, namely Generation Z, towards environmentally friendly products and greenwashing practices as a form of pseudo-sustainability.

Level of Environmental Awareness and Exposure to Information

The interview results show that the majority of respondents have a fairly high level of awareness of environmental issues, but the depth of their understanding varies. Most respondents (19 out of 30) stated that they are often exposed to environmental issues through social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Despite frequently hearing about these issues, for some respondents (11 out of 30), this information was not strong enough to drastically change their shopping habits. As expressed by respondent SP (18): "I am someone who actively follows environmental issues... but I often hear about them through social media."

Perception and Familiarity with Eco-Labels

Regarding eco-labels, there is a gap between visual recognition and substantive understanding. The majority of respondents (21 out of 30) claimed to be familiar with the term or symbol of eco-labels. However, their understanding tended to be limited to the visual aspect ("there is a green logo") rather than the technical standards of certification. Some respondents consider these labels to be merely indicators that the product is "better" or "recyclable," without knowing the specific criteria behind them.

Attitude-Behavior Gap

The most significant finding in this study is the conflict between moral idealism and economic reality. Absolutely all respondents (30 out of 30) agreed that environmentally friendly products are better than conventional products for reasons of sustainability and health. However, when faced with a price difference, the majority of respondents (21 out of 30) chose cheaper conventional products. Economic factors ("student budget/limited") were the main obstacle. Representative quotes included:

Respondent AD, 20:

"Usually in this economy, I prefer something that is cheap and suits us."

Respondent DT, 21:

"Will choose the cheaper option for now because it suits my limited income."

Consumer Trust and the Impact of the Pseudo-Sustainability Phenomenon

Respondents' level of trust in environmental claims is low and vulnerable. A total of 24 out of 30 respondents doubted that all green-labeled products were truly environmentally friendly. They suspected marketing gimmicks. Almost all respondents stated that they would react negatively if they found out that a brand was engaging in greenwashing as a form of pseudo-sustainability. These reactions included strong reactions from 27 out of 30 respondents, such as stopping purchasing, switching brands, and boycotting. There were also pragmatic reactions, with respondents stating that they were disappointed and their trust had diminished, but they might still use the product due to necessity or the lack of alternatives. One respondent, AD, 19, said:

“It’s difficult to immediately change... unless I have found a suitable substitute.”

Discussion

This section discusses the implications of the above findings by relating them to consumer behavior more broadly.

The Phenomenon of Superficial Eco-Knowledge Among Gen Z

This study found that although Generation Z is often referred to as the “green generation,” their literacy regarding environmentally friendly product attributes (eco-labels) remains superficial. High exposure to information on social media has successfully built awareness, but it is not yet deep enough to build strong technical knowledge. As a result, eco-labels function more as an attractive packaging aesthetic that catches the eye, but do not necessarily guarantee a purchase if not supported by other factors.

Price Sensitivity Barrier

These findings confirm the existence of an extreme Attitude-Behavior Gap. Respondents have a positive attitude toward environmental conservation, but their perceived behavioral control is weak due to limited purchasing power. Consumers in this study are very rational and pragmatic. Although they have a willingness to contribute to the environment, price sensitivity remains the ultimate determining factor. Environmentally friendly products are often perceived as “premium” or “expensive” items, making them unaffordable for the student demographic, unless the price difference with conventional products is very small.

The Crisis of Trust Due to Pseudo-Sustainability

The high level of skepticism among respondents shows that Generation Z is currently experiencing claim fatigue. They are bombarded with unverified claims of being “green,” “natural,” or “eco-friendly.” When pseudo-sustainability is exposed, the impact on brand equity is devastating. Consumers not only stop buying these products (boycott), but also develop cynical and apathetic attitudes toward future sustainability efforts. This indicates that for Generation Z as consumers, brand transparency and honesty are far more valuable than simply having a green label on the packaging.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study set out to investigate the complex interplay between Generation Z's awareness, attitudes, purchasing behavior, and skepticism in the context of green marketing and pseudo-sustainability. Based on a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 Gen Z respondents, the research yields several key findings that paint a picture of a generation caught between environmental idealism and market realities.

First, regarding awareness, Gen Z demonstrates high exposure to environmental issues, primarily through social media. However, this exposure does not uniformly translate into deep, technical knowledge. While most respondents are familiar with the visual cues of eco-labels, their understanding of the specific standards and certifications behind these labels remains superficial, indicating a state of “eco-knowledge pseudo” where recognition outpaces comprehension.

Second, a significant attitude-behavior gap was identified. Universally, respondents expressed a positive attitude towards environmentally friendly products, acknowledging their benefits for the planet. Yet, in practice, price sensitivity is a predominant barrier. When faced with a choice, a majority would opt for cheaper conventional products, citing limited financial capacity as a primary reason. This highlights that for Gen Z, perceived value and affordability often outweigh sustainability intentions in the final purchase decision.

Third, the research reveals a profound and widespread skepticism towards greenwashing. The majority of respondents expressed doubt that all products with green labels are genuinely sustainable. This skepticism culminates in a severe trust deficit upon discovering a brand's involvement in greenwashing, most respondents reported they would actively disengage through boycotting, switching brands, and warning their peers signaling that transparency and honesty are non-negotiable values for this cohort.

Theoretical Implications

This research enriches the literature on green consumer behavior by providing nuanced insights into the Gen Z demographic. It empirically confirms the presence of a pronounced attitude-behavior gap, a concept discussed in consumer theory, within the sustainability context. Furthermore, it introduces the notion of "eco-knowledge pseudo," suggesting that familiarity with sustainability terminology does not equate to functional literacy, a critical distinction for future models of green consumer awareness. The study also strengthens the theory of green skepticism, demonstrating its potency as a direct consequence of pseudo-sustainability and its power to negatively influence brand equity and purchase intent.

Practical Implications

Move Beyond Superficial Labeling: Simply placing a green leaf on packaging is insufficient and can be counterproductive. Companies must invest in consumer education, clearly communicating the specific meaning and credentials behind their eco-labels.

Address the Price Barrier: To bridge the attitude-behavior gap, brands need to innovate in making sustainable products more accessible. This could involve cost-efficient supply chains, offering refillable or concentrated products, or clearly communicating the long-term value (e.g., durability) to justify a premium.

Prioritize Radical Transparency: In an era of claim fatigue, Gen Z demands authenticity. Brands must ensure their sustainability claims are verifiable, backed by third-party certifications, and reflect genuine operational practices. Building trust through transparency is paramount, as the cost of greenwashing (a complete loss of consumer confidence) is exceptionally high.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is subject to certain limitations. The research employed a qualitative approach with a relatively small sample size of 30 respondents, which, while providing depth, limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire Gen Z population. The study was also geographically confined, and cultural factors may influence perceptions of sustainability in different regions. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data in interviews may be susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents overstate their eco-friendly attitudes and intentions.

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