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Generation Z adults and the sustainability of food retailers in Iași, Romania

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Abstract: Nowadays, sustainability is the focus of consumers, companies, and researchers, driving changes in both company and consumer behavior. Through this research we wanted to find out how Generation Z adults' position towards the sustainability of food retailers in the city of Iasi using qualitative research conducted through interviews. The analysis of the interviews revealed interesting aspects, a new definition of the concept and possible ideas for changes which could be adopted by food retailers to achieve a higher degree of sustainability. Among the components related to the sustainability of food retailers, our research showed that respondents consider that the most important are the selective waste collection and the use of green technologies, giving less importance to the employment of people with disabilities or contracting with local suppliers and the lowest priority being the level of employee wages. Some changes the interviewees proposed consist of installing solar panels and more efficient lighting systems, using biodegradable packaging for products and being more careful to the waste management system.

Keywords: sustainability; food retail; generation Z;

JEL Classification: Q01; Q56; D12;

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is, and will continue to remain, a major problem faced by the society in general. We can consider sustainability a real global phenomenon, being lately both the main point of interest for individuals, but also for companies and enterprises. If we were to look at sustainability as a word, from an etymological point of view, we learn that it has its roots in Latin language, formed by attaching the verb *tenere* to the upper particle *sus*, being doctrinally defined as that "capacity of a matter to maintain itself without external support" (Costache & Dumitrașcu, 2021). However, some authors (Haque, Yamoah, & Sroka, 2020) argue that there is no universally accepted definition of sustainability. Moreover, there is no consensus on either sustainable food or sustainable consumption (Reisch, Eberle, & Lorek, 2013).

In general, sustainability or sustainable development starts from the premise of "reducing poverty and social exclusion while guaranteeing living conditions similar to future generations" (Adamczyk & Adamczyk-Kowalczuk, 2022). As the focus of companies, various studies have shown that sustainability is one of the biggest problems faced by the agri-food industry. Several studies show that sustainability in terms of nutrition focuses on "environmentally friendly consumption and consumption of organic products" (Loureiro, McCluskey, & Mittelhammer, 2001). Sustainability, especially in the context of food, must be regarded as that relationship formed between the environment and the individual, thus we need to observe how the individual understands environmental issues and how they behave in relation to these sustainability issues. Thus, through our research we aim to observe how Generation Z adults understand sustainability in general, but also in the context of food retailers.

Since there are many discrepancies in the literature regarding the consumers' interest in sustainability in general, but especially in the sustainability of food retail, through our research we aimed to observe how Generation Z adults in Iasi, Romania, perceive sustainability within the food stores they frequent. In order to achieve this goal, we have set three main research objectives: to identify the characteristics a sustainable food retailer has, from the point of view of the Generation Z adult; to identify a definition of sustainability from the perspective of the Generation Z adult; to identify the changes that adult consumers of Generation Z would make in food retail stores from a sustainability perspective.

In our research we had ten adult Generation Z respondents who answered an interview. Their answers were eloquent and helped to outline a definition of the concept of sustainability from their perspective, to find out what characteristics, from a sustainability perspective, a food retailer has, and we made a comparison with the characteristics described in an ideal scenario from a sustainability perspective. Furthermore, we identified what are the main changes that adults of Generation Z believe that food retailers in Iași should make.

The generation Z which we decided to focus our study on is made up of individuals born from 1995 to 2010 (Su, Tsai, Chen, & Lv, 2019), in 2019 representing 32% of the global population (Su, Tsai, Chen, & Lv, 2019). Having a great purchasing power, they dominate the consumer market, being the focus of the marketing specialists of the companies on the market. We have identified in the literature several characteristics of Generation Z including "more open-mined than other generations, they value health, well-being and sustainability but at the same time have more pragmatic and cautious attitude to money compared to millennials" (Nikolic, Paunovic, Milovanovic, Lozovic, & Durovic, 2022). Another study shows that generation Z is "constantly involved in volunteering and activism, constantly wanting to improve the world and consciously choose to buy from brands that have publicly declared their social commitments" (Topic & Mitchell, 2019). A different study conducted by Cone Communications in 2017 shows that "87% of Americans prefer to buy products from companies that defend environmental and social responsibility, which demonstrates the importance of sustainability in business" (Cone Communications CSR Study, 2017). In another research, Generation Z is seen as the embodiment of sustainability revolutionaries (Szromek, Hysa, & Karasek, 2019), but Generation Z women have shown that they are least aware of environmental problems compared to Generations X and Z (Miskolczi, Jászberényi, & Tóth, 2021), the same study also showing that often certain sustainable behaviors adopted actually have economic reasons behind them, not necessarily for environmental protection, but another study by the Institute of Emerging Issues at North Carolina in 2015 showed that Generation Z is willing to pay more for healthier food. Two authors (Canio & Martinelli, 2021) also observed consumer behavior in the European Union and saw that they are willing to pay more for sustainable brands, but they also saw that there is also a discrepancy between what they support and the actions they take (Blake, Billieux, & Vögele, 2022).

Regarding the situation in Romania and the attitude of Romanian consumers towards product sustainability, in a research from 2012, to the question "How important is the impact of a product

on the environment for you when making the decision to buy? ", 43% of respondents said it was very important (Dinu, Schileru, & Atanase, 2012).
In the following sections we will present the research methodology used, the results obtained through our research, but also some conclusions and two possible future research directions.

METHODOLOGY

Our research is a qualitative one, qualitative research being the one dealing with "aspects of reality that cannot be quantified, focusing on understanding and explaining the dynamics of social relationships" (Ștefan, Popa, Olariu, & Popa, 2021). Thus, through our research we aim to understand how Generation Z adults relate to sustainability, especially to identify the characteristics of a sustainable food retailer from their point of view. We also aimed to identify what changes a food retailer would have to make to become more sustainable from the point of view of Generation Z adults. Lastly, we wanted to create a new definition for the word "sustainability" based on the information provided by the interviewees.
Being qualitative research, we chose as a research method the interview, being "one of the most widespread practices producing knowledge in social disciplines" (Ștefan, Popa, Olariu, & Popa, 2021). Creswell (2012) states that "a qualitative interview takes place when researchers ask one or more participants general, open-ended questions and record their answers, and then transcribe them and enter them in a computer file for analysis." For the interviews we used the qualitative content analysis, more exactly in a deductive manner. In our research, we "reviewed the data for content and coded for correspondence to or exemplification of the identified categories" (Elo, et al., 2014).
The research was conducted between December 2022 and January 2023 and included four phases. In the first phase we elaborated the necessary materials: the respondent's profile, the selection questionnaire, the interview guide and the informed consent. The second stage was dedicated to the selection of participants according to the criteria set out in the selection questionnaire, namely:

- to be members of the 18-25 age group in order to be part of the category "Generation Z adults"; (Nikolic et al., 2022)
- to be interested in the issue of sustainability;
- to be graduates or enrolled in a form of higher education. We chose this criteria because universities are actors who commit to "implementing sustainable practices and behaviors into all aspects of learning" (Fernandez, Cebrian, Regadera, & Fernandez, 2020) and research showed that sustainable education „yielded beneficial outcomes in terms of greater personal awareness of the importance of sustainability issues, individual behaviour changes, and, in some cases, attempts to influence others in their personal sphere" (Sidiropoulos, 2022).

The third stage consisted of conducting the interviews, and the fourth stage in the transcription and analysis of the interviews collected in the previous stage.
The interview pool consisted of ten interviewees who met the selection criteria and were conducted both physically and online via the CISCO Webex Meet platform. We conducted interviews until the interviewees gave no new information and the information provided started to repeat itself, this being the reason why we stopped the interviews after ten people being interviewed. The interviewees were recorded, and we manually transcribed the recordings afterward.
For the efficient coding of the interviews, we used the NVIVO software trial version downloaded online. In this manner, the coding was streamlined, and valuable information obtained from the interviews was not lost. The type of analysis used is the thematic analysis, being "a method for identifying and analyzing patterns or themes in the qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2014). As mentioned by another author, "Thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights" (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). We find this type of analysis to be suitable for our research as we are interested in finding out the point of view of Generation Z adults on the sustainability of food retailers. The findings can be used as a starting point for further comparisons with other generations, potentially improving the performance of food retailers in the sector of sustainability. As described in an article (Nowell et al., 2017), in the context of analyzing the data we followed these steps: "familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report".
In the first stage, that of familiarizing with the data, we loaded the transcription into NVIVO in order to start the process of analyzing the data. We read the interviews carefully and started to plan the potential codes and themes. In the second stage, after familiarization with the data we started the coding by identifying the most important parts of the interviews and attaching labels. In the next stage,

that of searching for themes, we sorted the codes into categories such as "changes", "ideal scenario", "strategies". In the fourth stage, that of reviewing the themes, we tried to analyze the resulted themes and to decide whether the coding was coherent, and some codes were moved from one theme to another one. In the next stage, that of defining and naming the themes, we reviewed them again and gave them names according to the reviewed content. In the last stage, the coding was completed, and we could use them in this research.

After the coding was done in NVIVO, the codes were extracted, and we made several tabular representations with the frequency of appearance of the codes which can be seen at the end of of this paper.

In order to respect the protection participants' personal data, they signed an informed consent prior to the actual interview. They were also anonymized using codes I1, I2 and up to I10 for them, the codes being distributed randomly, unrelated to the order in which they were interviewed.

RESULTS

Definition of the concept

The first objective of our research was to identify a definition that Generation Z adults give to sustainability in order to be able to see if the way they perceive sustainability is similar to how organizations and doctrine define the same concept. The concept of sustainability and sustainable development are used interchangeably in literature, the major difference between sustainability and sustainable development being in the fact that "sustainability is thought of as a long-term goal, while sustainable development refers to the multitude of processes and ways to achieve sustainability" (Klein, Watted, & Zion, 2021). The most common definition of the concept is that offered by Gro Harlem Brundtland, being known as "development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the possibility of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 2022).

In the first part of the interview, we asked the respondents to make word associations, starting from a few given words. The interviewees were asked to say the first word which comes into their minds when they hear the words sustainability, sustainable development and green technologies. For the word sustainability, the following words and phrases were received: environmental protection (four times), recycling, development, viable, ecology, climate and economy. For sustainable development we received the following associations: environmental protection (two times), ecology, recycling, resistance, time, future, sustainability, materials and resilience. Lastly, for green technologies, the following associations were made: solar panels (three times), complementary energy, sustainability, durable, environment, bio, wind power and ecology.

According to the associations the interviewees made, these three concepts are connected and have a high degree of similarity. Moreover, the high frequency of occurrence of the phrase "environmental protection", six times, shows the fact that the interviewees think of this concept the most and position the environmental protection as being the most important aspect of sustainability, giving less importance to the economic and social pillars. We also noticed the appearance of the words "resistance, time and future", these being the core of sustainability and sustainable development, being able to make the resources available and usable for future generations. In the green technologies field, we can observe that there is a lack of knowledge in special practices and technologies, the most frequent answer regarding solar panels, a well-known ecologic technology. By addressing this type of question, we introduced the interviewees in the subject of the interview in order to allow their minds to make connections between the most important concepts and key elements of the interview.

In table no. 1, we summarized the codes most frequently encountered in the definitions given during the interviews, accompanied by the frequency of their occurrence. Among the collected interviews, we have noticed a definition that comes closest to the most popular definition of the concept: "It is a concept that helps the environment, the planet, to be usable for future generations and helps people to develop morally and materially in a very good manner" (Male, 23 years old). What makes this definition special is the fact that it includes all three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social and economic.

Observing the codes and their frequency of occurrence, it can be concluded that half of the respondents (5) understand the basic idea behind sustainability, namely that of the future, of the importance of conserving resources to be available for future generations. The high frequency of the code "caring for a healthy future" shows us the great importance the quality of life has for the respondents, being utterly important to be able to live a long and healthy life. Considering the three pillars of sustainability: the environment, the economy, and the social pillar, it can be seen that they are understood and recognized by the

respondents, but to a moderate extent, with quite low frequencies of occurrence.
By analyzing cumulatively, the definitions given, we developed a new definition of sustainability, namely: "Sustainability is a set of behaviors that contribute to a long development over time, showing care for the environment, for the economy and for healthy living, in the absence of chemicals and in the presence of responsibility, ensuring a good production-consumption ratio". If we were to make a comparison between the most popular definition of sustainability, cited previously, and the definition obtained from the interviews, it can be observed that the new definition is larger, considering more aspects related to sustainability, which shows us the fact that Generation Z adults from Iași have a good understanding of the topic. Our definition recognizes as parts of the phenomenon of sustainability very important aspects from the point of view of food retailers such as the lack of chemicals in foods and improving the healthy living of people.

Characteristics of the sustainable food retailer
Through our research we wanted to highlight what are the main characteristics observed by the interviewees that make food retailers sustainable, but also to observe how, in an ideal scenario, the sustainable food retailer would look like. As showed in table no. 2, at the moment, when asked what the definition of a sustainable supermarket would be, our respondents have mainly identified contracting with local producers, but also the installation of recycling points. On the next position, the respondents' attention was directed to strategies to avoid food waste ("To select products that are approaching the expiration date and sell them at a reduced price exactly to avoid food waste"- Woman, 22 years old), but also the use of sustainable materials in terms of packaging and bags sold in stores ("Use of packaging / bags made out of recyclable materials"- Woman, 23 years old).
From the codes presented in table no. 2 in relation to a sustainable supermarket in an ideal scenario, we can make the following characterization, according to the frequency of occurrence of the codes: A sustainable supermarket should be supplied with green energy (solar panels, heat pumps), have selective recycling / collection points located, sell healthy products, packed in sustainable packaging, have electric car charging stations, be spacious and well organized to facilitate the buying experience, combat food waste, contract with local producers, be inclusive by hiring people with disabilities and reduce emissions as much as possible. At the moment, such a food retailer cannot be identified in reality, but half (5) of the respondents consider that the food retailer they frequent is close to the ideal scenario but can make a series of improvements.

Observed sustainable behaviours
The interviewees were asked to explain the sustainable behaviors they observed in the food retailers they frequent. As shown in table no. 3, we can see that respondents notice the use of packaging and bags made of sustainable materials, packaging being the first thing that a buyer encounters when selecting a product from the shelf. The second most common code refers to recycling, i.e., selective waste collection points and recycling programmes marketed by shops. The low frequency of occurrence of the other codes indicates two perspectives: either consumers do not pay enough attention to other aspects of sustainability, or shops do not make sufficient efforts in terms of e-receipts, sustainability awareness campaigns, food banks, or food waste prevention. One answer we found interesting concerns the operating schedule of the stores that is adapted to reduce energy waste ("it - named store- reduced the operating schedule by 2 hours a day to reduce energy waste"- Male, 23 years old).

Changes leading to increased sustainability
The interviewees were introduced to a role-playing game in which they were asked to imagine that they were the manager of the grocery stores they frequent. They were given the task of explaining what changes they would make from three perspectives: from the perspective of the technologies used, from the perspective of the products and from the perspective of the suppliers with whom they contract.
In terms of technological changes, as seen in table no. 4, four respondents took into consideration making changes in order to care more for the natural resources, by this meaning to use technologies which pollute less and use green technologies such as solar panels and heat pumps. Two respondents considered very important to use closed refrigerators in stores in order to use less electricity. One respondent proposed the use of an electronic/digital receipt, giving up the classic one made out of paper. One respondent also proposed using technologies with less polluting freon and another respondent proposed to introduce de online shopping in the store's app in order to buy online directly from them, not by using another mobile application. Lastly, one respondent considered that no changes regarding the technologies are needed.
Regarding the produce sold in stores, the respondents also had interesting responses, three of

them consider that the most important change regards the packaging of the products and think using ecological packaging would be a great change. Two respondents think the produce should come mainly from local suppliers. It is also interesting that two respondents think healthier food should be sold in stores and another two consider minimizing the waste is the most needed change. Another two respondents said that they would like more consistency regarding the products and only one mentioned the use of closed refrigerators in this category.

In the last category, the one regarding the suppliers, the majority of respondents, six of them, mentioned the suppliers should be local and two of the respondents would contact the suppliers and ask them to use better packaging (more durable and ecological) and one respondent considered that no changes are needed in this area, as it can be seen in table no. 4.

Even though they were not the most popular responses, having a low frequency, we mention a series of changes that we found very interesting in the responses received. A first change from the perspective of technologies that we consider to be particularly important concerns the installation of closed display cabinets or closed refrigerators to minimize the electricity consumption of stores ("First of all I would install closed refrigerators to minimize energy consumption", Male, 24 years old). Another interesting change in terms of technologies is "Giving up the classic receipt and introducing the digital receipt into the application" (Female, 21 years old), to reduce paper consumption. Another simple, but very effective idea was given by a respondent who proposed "replacing the lighting with light bulbs in stores with windows". (Male, 23 years old).

CONCLUSIONS

The adults of Generation Z, on whom we decided to focus this study, are aged between 18 and 25 and, as we have mentioned before, are considered to be "sustainability revolutionaries" (Szromek, Hysa, & Karasek, 2019). Through the present study we cannot say that we have noticed this revolutionary character in terms of the sustainability of food retailers, but we have found that they are careful to the details and behaviors shown by the grocery stores and supermarkets they frequent.

In our research we tried to discover what is a definition of sustainability from the point of view of Generation Z adults, but also to observe what are the main characteristics of a sustainable retailer, along with possible directions of change identified by respondents. We have produced that definition of sustainability, as it is seen by our respondents: "Sustainability is a set of behaviors that contribute to a sustainable development over time, maintaining care for the environment, for the economy and for the healthy living of people, in the absence of chemicals and in the presence of responsibility, ensuring a good production-consumption ratio". The new definition is larger than the “classic” definitions of the sustainability concept, meaning that our respondents understand the concept very well and

Although limited, our research brings a series of information that is particularly important both for the general public and for researchers, but also for the managers of food retailers. We can say that Generation Z adults are inclined to observe the sustainable strategies and practices of the stores, being good critics of the problems faced by the stores. It was also very interesting for us to observe the changes they would make within the stores, coming up with interesting ideas, some of them being easy to put into practice to raise the sustainability of the stores.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

Our research does not tend to be exhaustive, given the limitations imposed both by the research methodology, namely that qualitative research cannot be extrapolated, but also by the target group that we had in mind, namely the adults of Generation Z. Possible directions of future research include the extension of the target group to other age groups and can then conduct a comparative study between Generation Z and Generation X, something that we propose for a future study. Moreover, our research did not aim to make connections between the level of sustainability of the stores and the decision of the consumers whether to buy from that store, this being a future research direction we propose.

Another limitation of our research consisted of using both face to face interviews and online interviews, given the short period of time for conducting the research. Using the online CISCO platform, both the interviewer and the interviewee had limitations and could not dialogue as efficient as face to face and the information obtained might not be extremely detailed.

Informed consent statement

The informed consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to the interview and their

identities are protected according to the GDPR standards.

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Biographical sketch
The author is a Management PhD student at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania. Having a bachelor's degree in Law and a master's degree in European Law, the author is highly interested in issues regarding the environment and the environmental protection. Contact information: madalinapetrea@hotmail.com.

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LIST OF TABLES

Table No1.
Tabular representation of the frequency of codes relating to the definition of sustainability

Code description	Code	Frequency
Mention of the phrases "long-term", "long period", "future", "healthy living", "health", "good for the body", “no chemicals”	Caring for a healthy future	8
Mention of the term "environment".	Caring for the environment	3
Mention of the phrases "civic", "people", “needs”.	Caring for society	3
Mentioning the phrases "economy", "to spend", “production-consumption ratio”	Caring for the economy	3
Mentioning the phrase "responsibility".	Responsibility	1
Mention of the phrase "sustainable development".	Sustainable development	1

Table No. 2.
Comparative representation of the codes identified in the current characteristics of the stores compared to the ideal scenario in terms of sustainability

Codes identified regarding retailers' current sustainability characteristics	Frequency	Codes identified for retailers' ideal sustainability scenario	Frequency
Avoid food waste	3	Avoid food waste	1
Local producers	4	Local producers	1
Green energy	2	Green energy	4
Recycling	4	Recycling	4
Using sustainable materials	3	Sustainable packaging	3
Care for products	1	Electric car charging stations	2
Clean	1	Environmentally friendly	3
Dedicated districts (bio)	1	Healthy/quality foods	4
Employees with disabilities	1	Employees with disabilities	1
Employee availability	1	Reducing emissions	1
Promoting healthy habits	1	More spacious/organized	3

Table No.3.
Tabular representation of the frequency of codes on current sustainable strategies

Code description	Code	Frequency
Mentioning the phrase "raising awareness", “afforestation campaigns”, “gatherings of donations”, “recycling campaigns”	Campaigns	4
Mention of the words "bio food", "eco food”, "food waste", "expiration".	Foods	5
Mention of electronic receipts.	Electronic receipts	2
Mention of employees with disabilities.	Employees with disabilities	1
Mention of the organization of food banks.	Food banks	1
Mention of charging stations for electric cars, reduced opening hours of the store.	Energy	2
Mention of strategies such as 'recycling reward', 'bins', 'containers', 'selective recycling point'	Recycling	6
Mention of phrases such as 'cardboard packaging', 'biodegradable bags', 'biofuel', 'biodegradable', 'recycled material'.	Sustainable packaging	7

Table No.4.
Tabular representation of the changes proposed

Changes according to themes	Explanation
Changes in terms of the technologies used: expressing care for natural resources, using closed refrigerators, online shopping, using less polluting freon, giving digital receipts, no changes.	The highest frequency (4) is the implementation of technologies that do not harm natural resources (which are less polluting, installation of solar panels, efficient electric lighting).
Changes from a product perspective: using eco-packaging, being more consistent, more healthy products, minimizing waste, using closed refrigerators, having local suppliers.	The greatest frequency (3) is the change of the packaging of the products in order to be as environmentally friendly as possible (recycled material, biodegradable material, minimization of packaging).
Changes from a supplier perspective: having local suppliers, using more durable packaging, no changes.	The highest frequency (6) in terms of suppliers is contracting with local suppliers to help the economy and stimulate the sale of local seasonal products.