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Article

# A Qualitative Approach to the Sustainable Orientation of Generation Z in Retail: The Case of Romania

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**Abstract:** In order to highlight the extent to which young consumers, or members of Generation Z, are familiar with the sustainability principles implemented by retailers operating in emerging markets, the authors conducted a qualitative empirical research study with the help of a semi-structured in-depth interview guide. Respondents were asked to express their perception of the extent to which their favorite retailers adopted and implemented the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. The results show that respondents viewed retailers' sustainability orientation favorably, specifying concrete measures implemented by their preferred retailers. They seemed to favor those retail networks making a useful and proactive contribution to resource preservation and environmental protection, whilst taking care of employees' welfare and being involved in their local communities. From a theoretical perspective, the paper makes a clear contribution to enhancing the generational theory-based studies on emerging markets, where market conditions and polyvalent consumer behavior are highly dynamic, and where sustainability principles play a major role in drawing and maintaining their customers. From a management perspective, the paper provides retailers with an overview on the measures, tactics, and actions that allow them to properly target consumers and develop a proper customer approach strategy.

**Keywords:** sustainable development; retail; consumer perception; generational theory; Generation Z/Zers; iGeneration; Baby Boomers; emerging market

## 1. Introduction

As international bodies and institutions increasingly focus on corporate sustainability, the effects thereof are being felt not only in mature, but also in emerging markets. At present, sustainable development is one of the major goals that all players in the value chain strive for, be they producers, intermediaries, or distributors. They approach customers drawing attention to their "care" for the welfare of the local community and environmental protection, making profit while reducing their ecological footprint, and providing employees with fair working conditions.

In the current circumstances, applying sustainability principles in various emerging markets, such as the Romanian market, continues to be a challenge for global retail networks. Literature is replete with research on sustainable development strategies, measures, and/or dimensions in retail (Sewell et al. 2017; Placet et al. 2005) from both the retailer's perspective, in terms of specific actions undertaken (Palma et al. 2018) and the consumer's perspective, in terms of how they react to such actions (Ehgartner 2018; Majerova et al. 2020). However, there has been little research on emerging economies, as practitioners risk mismanaging the situation and being unable to properly identify consumers'

reasons, expectations, and behavior. Equally scarce is research on the characteristics of members of Gen Z, only some theoretical papers addressing this issue (Dabija et al. 2019), thus impeding efforts to target them and draw them to the store, and to satisfy their needs and desires. As young consumers are a lot more concerned about environmental protection actions, and are aware of the negative effects of pollution, preferring a healthier environment and often choosing companies implementing sustainability principles (Jain et al. 2014; Epuran et al. 2018), we opted for members of Generation Z as a suitable target segment for the current research. A further reason for choosing this generation is that their members are keener to adopt green products, even if this comes at higher monetary cost, as long as they can live with the feeling that they have made a major contribution to decreasing pollution and caring for the environment (Kirmani and Khan 2016).

Retailers tend to develop specific strategies depending on various socio-demographic characteristics aimed at satisfying target segments. The generational approach, depending on individuals' year of birth, is frequently used by retailers as a relevant criterion when developing offers (Schewe and Meredith 2004; Williams et al. 2010; Williams and Page 2011; Dabija et al. 2019). Whereas young people belonging to Generation Z (born between 1994 and 2010) (Williams and Page 2011; Lan 2014) or Millennials (born between 1974 and 1994) (Williams and Page 2011) are easier to target through products made in compliance with the principles of sustainability, mature people and the elderly make purchases according to different criteria: perceived added value, quality-price ratio, product origin etc. (De Paula 2003; Williams 2005; Dabija et al. 2018a). Although some Gen Z members are still quite young, due to the spread of communication technologies and social media they are very well informed about retailers and their offers, developing strong feelings and perceptions towards them. They represent a potentially huge consumer segment for retailers (De Paula 2003; Williams 2005; Benjamin 2008).

Building on these observations, our investigation seeks to identify the significance of the concept of "sustainability" among members of Generation Z (also known as Zers, Gen Z, Baby Boomers or iGeneration—see Williams and Page 2011), and how this concept affects and influences their perception towards society, brands, companies, and different organizations. Therefore, we used a qualitative approach to identify how important the dimensions of sustainability are for Gen Zers. We developed this based on the literature, applying a semi-structured in-depth interview guide addressed at members of this generation. The research instrument highlighted their perceptions on the adoption of sustainability principles, as well as their choice of favorite retailer, depending on the sustainable activities carried out.

Following the literature review on the sustainability orientation and characteristics of Generation Z, the paper presents the dimensions of sustainability applied to retail. The third section presents the research methodology and research context, followed in the fourth section by the results and discussion of the empirical research. The last section is dedicated to presenting the theoretical and managerial implications of the research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Sustainable Orientation of Generation Z

Sustainability or sustainable development is a concept used more and more frequently in recent theory and practice (Cherian and Jacob 2012; Kwok et al. 2016; Androniceanu 2019). People have become aware of the scope of this phenomenon, and have watched it unfold in daily business. The literature (Valentine and Powers 2013; Eastman and Liu 2012; Dabija et al. 2018b) indicates that young people are liable to adopt a lifestyle based on the principles of sustainability. They seek green products and services, and buy from retailers which implement proper environmental protection strategies, promote socially responsible consumption, and adopt specific measures to protect employees and support local communities. Among the present generations of consumers (Baby Boomers, X, Y, Z

and Alpha), Gen Z members are the most interested in incorporating sustainability into their activities (Lan 2014; Dabija et al. 2019; Lazányi and Bilan 2017).

According to the generational theory, Generation Z, also called Baby Boomers or iGeneration, includes individuals born between 1994 and 2010 (Williams and Page 2011; Dabija et al. 2017a, 2019; Persson 2019). Outnumbering Millennials (Gen Y) by more than one million, Generation Z members or the iGeneration (Vasiliiu et al. 2016; Jacobsen 2017; Velčovská 2018) make up the most attractive segment for producers and retailers. iGeneration's buying power is five or six times that of Generation X (Gilbert 2003; Jacobsen 2017), which turns the former into a segment of high interest to marketers. iGeneration members were born in a period marked by the fast advancement of online communication, the appearance of social media, and the ongoing technological development. Therefore, they are highly familiar with technological progress, mobile devices, and gadgets and with the latest online discoveries. In fact, social media and technology are important drivers for developing this generation, without which daily activities seem impossible to perform (Dabija et al. 2019). There is a pressing need for access to information, which makes Gen Zers become faster aware of global phenomena, trends, and discoveries. They understand not only the scope, but also the impact of these phenomena on their future. Unlike their grandparents belonging to the Baby Boomers generation (people born after WW II until around 1965), their parents (Generation X born between 1965–1979), or their older siblings—Millennials (born between 1980 and 1994/1995) (Williams and Page 2011), Generation Z members express a very keen interest in sustainable development and social responsibility, and tend to get involved in environmental protection actions (Dabija et al. 2018a).

Although belonging to modern society, which features both online socializing and classical interaction between individuals, Gen Zers have adopted traditional values such as respect for others, sincerity, honesty, responsibility (Williams and Page 2011), and are willing to make an effort to change the negatives they are dissatisfied with (Williams et al. 2010; Dabija et al. 2019). They do not want to take major risks, and carefully analyze everything they do. They are aware that their decisions may affect other people and the environment or jeopardize future generations' access to resources similar to those available to current generations (Dabija and Băbuț 2013). Their traditional values have prompted Gen Zers to adopt sustainable behavior and seek their own welfare. They stick to the principles of sustainability in everything they do. Zers globally believe that an organization's business should have a positive effect on or generate benefits for the environment (Reiners 2020). At present, more and more retailers are involving young people in their social responsibility campaigns (Meehan 2016), or conducting marketing research to find out in advance iGeneration's perceptions, motivations, and opinions concerning their favorite activities. Therefore, organizations may change their strategies to satisfy consumers' evolving needs and desires when informed about products and services and/or purchasing them.

Gen Zers' affinity with technology and the constant presence of the Internet in their lives have turned into an advantage for big companies (Batte et al. 2007). When online, people are more outspoken and explicit in expressing their opinions. Retailers can discover consumers' needs and desires in real time, with a lot less time needed for research. The online environment and its advantages have brought about changes in retailers' strategies. Companies have had the opportunity to enrich the information provided to consumers, depending on their feedback through social media and/or the web pages (Dabija et al. 2018b).

Companies have also sought to make easier the consumer's decision-making process by giving them proper information and allowing them the possibility to compare a company's offers with those of competitors. Socializing, fostered by the development of the Internet, has been another gain for companies. The experience of other consumers is used to influence potential customers and draw them to certain retailers. Studies have shown that Generation Z prefer to purchase products from companies that apply sustainability principles and attempt, by means of social campaigns, to reduce the footprint of their activities (Last 2014). Unlike Gen Xers, Digital Natives adopt a proactive attitude, as they believe they contribute to a healthy environment through their own personal involvement.

Their penchant for green products is most often the result of retailers' communication campaigns and social media, where opinion-makers can influence consumers' attitudes to the big retailers and to the products they make and sell (Doster 2013).

## 2.2. Retailers Sustainable Approach

Retailers are increasingly confronted with growing challenges in the supply chains (Wiese et al. 2012) of which they are part, due to the need to rationalize their own business strategies to the requirements and expectations of customers, as well as to the requests from other stakeholders (Freeman 1984). More and more frequently, these pressures are aimed at using sustainable business strategies, namely, implementing in the approach of target markets the principles, tactics, and actions specific to sustainable development (Lehner 2015), implemented consistently in all organizational processes. Thus, retailers seek to preserve resources (Grove et al. 1996), to reduce the consumption of raw materials, and to reduce pollution (Esposito et al. 2017) in order to ensure that future generations have access to resources similar to those available to current generations (Brundtland Commission 1987). Climate change caused by excessive pollution and resource intensive use cannot be neglected any more (Parlińska and Pagare 2018); thus, business strategies must aim at minimal environmental impact (Meller and Magaš 2014), efficient production, and responsible consumption (Venn et al. 2017).

Sustainability is a concept widely used by organizations and entities, with medium and long-term implications from an economic, social and environmental perspective (Toman 1992; Dabija and Băbuț 2013; Ilić et al. 2013), assuming the existence of strategies based on ethical principles in order to create the most favorable prerequisites for the balanced development of future generations (Gangone and Asandei 2017). Hence the "Triple Bottom Line" concept, frequently encountered in the literature, involves the development of environmental agenda based on the three dimensions mentioned above (Elkington 1997; Jones et al. 2008; Dan 2019). Certain factors such as technology evolution, increased awareness of the importance of sustainable development by individuals, government pressure, and media attention have forced retailers to focus on implementing these principles in business strategies (Jones et al. 2005c).

### 2.2.1. Environmental Dimension

The environmental dimension of sustainability is based on the fact that mankind's existence depends on a fragile ecosystem capable of only partially regenerating resources consumed globally each year (Jones et al. 2008). This fact raises certain problems and/or challenges for organizations, and especially for retailers, to ensure the unrestricted access of future generations to prerequisites such as those available to present generations (Vaccaro 2009). With the changes occurring in the environment, competitive advantage gained over time by companies may be affected, requiring their adaptation and the identification of new markets in respect to new ideas and opportunities for generating comparative competitive advantage (Kabue and Kilika 2016). Retailers are contributing to the protection of nature through the reuse of packaging and recycling of materials, reducing resource consumption (Grove et al. 1996), and also by differentiating and ensuring the visibility of green and/or organic products (Pop and Dabija 2013), or promoting sustainable business practices within the supply chain (Kumar 2014). Consumer preference for green products differs between generations, being bought more by younger people than by the more mature or elderly, which somewhat limits their large-scale introduction into stores (Dabija and Bejan 2017b; Dabija et al. 2017b). The eco and green product range is still under development, with many retail chains offering them within their range (Dabija and Pop 2013). One should add that the highest level of sustainability is known as the circular economy approach (Šebestová and Sroka 2020).

The relatively low acceptance of green products is due to a certain extent to the premium price at which they are sold, the lack of consumer education, a precarious mentality developed in their favor, legislative hindrances that support green producers only sporadically, and the more intense promotion of conventional products (Crane 2000; Comitetul Economic și Social European 2017; Dabija 2018).

For a better identification of these products, and to avoid any confusion, consumers use the labels of third parties that have authority to support product compliance (Lehner 2015). To indirectly stimulate consumer sustainable behavior, Auchan Retail Romania organizes periodically a customer raffle, with vouchers received after the recycling of aluminum cans (Auchan Retail Romania 2019). The challenge for retailers remains, however, the way that they encourage their suppliers to adopt environmentally friendly practices, alongside the development of a green-minded mentality, and their involvement in properly informing consumers about the impact of sold products on the natural environment (Jones et al. 2005c).

### 2.2.2. Economic Dimension

From an economic perspective, sustainable development assumes long-term economic growth without degrading the natural environment (Meller and Magaš 2014) and being able to provide a stable workplace (Gangone and Asandei 2017). Economic growth is an important pillar in shaping sustainable global development strategies, pursued with persistence at both governmental and organizational level (Jones et al. 2008). From a sustainable perspective, the economic components relate to employment opportunities created at organizational level, the ethical valorization of the labor force by ensuring correct payment for the work done, the regular payment of dividends to shareholders, the taxes and duties, as well as the reinvestment of profit in order to sustain long-term economic growth, etc. (Jones et al. 2005a; Dabija et al. 2018a).

Retail is the link in the value chain between producers and consumers, regrouping goods and helping to increase the efficiency of their sale (Lavorata 2018). At the same time, retail allows for short-term financial benefits such as cost reduction (Jones et al. 2005b), influencing consumer sustainability and/or preference for green products (Björklund et al. 2016), and in particular, generating bids in accordance with the principles of sustainability. Even though most customers base their purchases on a favorable ratio between quality and price, attractive quantity offers, or low prices, there are also individuals who prefer those retailers which implement a sustainability strategy, fully aligning their expectations with their offers (Lehner 2015; Dabija and Bejan 2017a). In order to both attract consumers and to fully implement a sustainable approach, retailers are looking to communicate their sustainable actions and the measures taken; for example, Carrefour Romania is using a chatbot module on social networks to enable users to address questions about green products and/or the environmental actions of the retailer (Carrefour Romania 2018).

### 2.2.3. Social Dimension

This dimension of sustainability is associated with the employees of organizations and members of the local communities in which they operate. Usually, the social dimension of sustainability includes ensuring decent working conditions for employees, along with the health and safety of individuals, and improving the living standards of local communities where organizations have work points, production, or distribution facilities (Elkington 1997; Wilson 2015). By implementing these practices, companies give back “something” from their own activities to the community they are part of and create added value for society (Alhaddi 2015). Organizations are transposing into their general business strategies the social dimension of sustainability through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which includes tactics and actions of a company addressed in the community (Kotzab et al. 2011; Björklund and Forslund 2014; Schulz and Flanigan 2016; Koh et al. 2017; Ruiz-Molina and Gil-Saura 2018). For example, Kaufland Romania has a partnership with the Pegas bike manufacturer, offering employees up to 60% discount in order to encourage a healthy lifestyle (Kaufland Romania 2018). Lidl Discount often sponsors organizations that militate to ensure a good education for disadvantaged children (Lidl Discount 2017). Although such CSR practices are currently commonplace in the retail industry, retailers must strike a balance between societal discourse and long-term business interests to avoid contradictions (Lehner 2015), which might ultimately affect their brand image.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. The Research Context

For the research, the authors chose an emerging European market, Romania, for three reasons: the large number of retailers operating in the market (Pagliacci et al. 2019; Stanciu et al. 2019), the retailers' contribution to the country's economic development (ZFEnglish 2018), and the high percentage of young people belonging to Generation Z (Worldometer 2020). Romanian and foreign international retailers selling food and non-food products in this emerging market have sought to come in line with European policies in general, and with European sustainable development policies in particular (Gangone and Asandei 2017). The big retail networks have created their own environmental agenda by implementing actions in accordance with the main dimensions of sustainability (Elkington 1997; Jones et al. 2008; Vătămănescu et al. 2017). However, sustainability seems to be understood in a different way by Romanian consumers, who view it as a particular characteristic, such as recycling or conservation, and not as an entire set of dimensions, as it really is (Pagliacci et al. 2019; Popp et al. 2019). The confusion created hinders retailers' attempts to meet customers' expectations concerning sustainability.

The aim of the present research is to highlight how members of Generation Z, also called iGeneration or Zers, comprising people born between 1994 and 2010 (Williams and Page 2011), perceive the sustainable dimensions of retailers in an emerging market: Romania. These young people are characterized by a high level of optimism (Wellner 2000) and are concerned for their own safety as well as that of the community in which they live (Dabija et al. 2019). Holding traditional values, Gen Zers are willing to spend part of their leisure time helping the disadvantaged or getting involved in the life of the community. According to their own opinions, Gen Zers believe that, by the help they provide, they "reward" the community where they were born and have lived. Being pragmatic and responsible for the effects of their actions (accountability), Generation Z members are becoming more and more concerned for the environment in which they live (Kirmani and Khan 2016; Dabija et al. 2019).

#### 3.2. The Research Design

In order to assess how members of Generation Z assess the sustainable actions, measures and strategies implemented by food and non-food retailers on the given emerging market, the authors conducted an empirical research study, using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide. In developing this research instrument, the authors considered the literature guidelines (Elkington 1997) according to which sustainable development is composed of environmental protection, together with the social and economic dimensions. Respondents were asked to assess the dimensions of sustainable development in food and non-food retail because they either shopped by themselves in such stores, or they influenced to a certain extent their parents' buying decisions (Swoboda et al. 2010; Dabija and Băbuț 2019; Dabija et al. 2018b; Haws et al. 2014).

The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face with respondents. They had previously been informed about the content of the research and instructed to give answers based on their own experience. As the questions were open-ended, the respondents had to point to actual actions they remembered regarding sustainable development being implemented by their favorite retailer. The information was collected by writing down on paper and/or laptop the ideas conveyed by respondents. The obtained data were copied, coded, and analyzed by the authors according to the procedures of qualitative data analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The data obtained through the interview guide were analyzed manually in concordance with the selected research subject.

Although more than 500 people were approached, only 153 completed interview guides were obtained in the end, as some potential respondents either refused to answer all the questions, or they withdrew from the interview. Respondents were approached in public places, parks, in the street, at home or at their place of study. Given the nature of the analyzed topic (sustainability) and its implication for the individual's everyday life, the authors concluded that the selected method made

easier the interaction with the people sampled (Keegan 2009; Popa and Dabija 2019), who would thus provide sincere answers. Each interview lasted for about 15 min.

The in-depth interview was designed starting from the general and moving to the particular. To interpret the data, the first step was reading all the answers to identify the main aspects highlighted by respondents, according to the principle “*what is going on in the field*” (Barcelos and Rossi 2014; Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The next step was grouping thematically the information obtained from respondents. The information was systematized into six thematic categories (Corbin and Strauss 1990), namely: (1) awareness and understanding of the concept of sustainability and the aspects they associated with it; (2) respondents’ general attitude to sustainable development (their social and environmental orientation); (3) the degree to which respondents already relied on sustainable actions in their daily life, their reasons for doing so, and assessing the extent to which their own behavior may be considered sustainable towards society and the environment; (4) criteria for choosing food and/or non-food stores according to the sustainability measures these stores implemented; (5) the importance attached to sustainability dimensions (social, economic and environmental) in the stores where they shopped; (6) respondents’ awareness of their favorite retailers’ actions towards sustainability. Data interpretation was also done by comparing respondents’ opinions with the results of previous research contained in the literature (Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

As regards the generation to which they belonged, respondents were homogenous, being born between 1994 and 2000. According to the literature (Williams and Page 2011), people born within this interval are thought of as belonging to Generation Z. Most respondents were undergraduates or Master’s students from different regions of the country, indicating a relatively good geographical distribution and representativeness of answers: the North-West development region (Cluj-Napoca), the Bucharest development region (Bucharest), Centre development region (Braşov, Târgu-Mureş, Sibiu, Alba-Iulia), and the North-East development region (Suceava). Thus, the sample comprised respondents from four out of eight development regions of Romania (MDRAP.ro 2013).

From the perspective of the socio-demographic profile, 60% of respondents were women, most of them having an income of between 310–620 euro. Of the 40% of male respondents, 24% had an income of between 310–620 euro, and 15% were in the upper range (621–1240 euro). However, a significant number of respondents were reluctant to provide information on the income they had at their disposal, with 56% not specifying the monthly amount available to them. From an educational perspective, 54% of respondents had graduated from university, the difference of 46% being respondents who had high school or post-high school studies.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Theme 1: Respondents’ Understanding and Awareness of the Concept of Sustainability

Respondents associated sustainability with a wide range of concepts, such as “*an activity which, when conducted, does not impact the environment nor does it deplete resources*”, “*the balance between economic growth and environment protection*”, the set of “*measures to ensure long-term efficiency and mitigate environmental harm*”, “*the management of businesses without exhausting natural resources*”, “*the state of a system in which it uses available resources so that it can keep long-term operation*”, a “*process through which a system or any other thing keeps going by means of its own resources*”. The answers show that respondents knew about the fundamental principle underlying the notion of sustainability, as well as its pillars: environmental protection, concern for society, local communities and/or other people, and the economic aspects. Respondents also provided broader and more precise answers, such as: “*Sustainability (or sustainable development) means satisfying one’s own needs without jeopardizing the needs of our descendants, which further means that we have to protect the environment throughout our survival and evolution process*” or “*Sustainability is when an activity is performed without exhausting available resources and damaging the environment, therefore, without compromising the chances of ensuring the needs of future generations*”. This understanding of sustainability indeed comes close to the definition given by the



Brundtland Commission (1987), according to which sustainability is development intended to satisfy the current needs of the population without compromising the access of future generations to similar resources (Martin and Schouten 2012; Dabija and Băbuț 2013).

The statements above show that the Gen Zers were concerned with environmental protection, as they were willing to help society and/or the community in which they lived, making determined and remarkable efforts to this effect. In fact, respondents believed that the application of sustainability principles within everyday activities enables the rational use of resources, which prevents their exhaustion. These opinions are in line with the literature (Valentine and Powers 2013), according to which Zers have a much stronger inclination towards environmental protection than previous generations, exhibiting a strong “green” orientation.

While a significant number of respondents had acquainted themselves with the concept of sustainability when attending various training programs or university classes, there were those who believed that the environment, its protection and resource preservation is one of the major concerns of contemporary society: *“sustainable development has a major impact on society due to the implementation of automated systems which provide quantity at high quality and thus satisfy consumers’ needs”, “companies should organize their business so as to avoid harming the environment or producing waste and toxic substances or substances that take time to decay”*. In their opinion, sustainability meant *“educating people about environment protection and striving to inculcate in people the idea that each one of us should feel responsible towards environment protection”*. Moreover, there were some respondents who had undertaken thorough research into sustainability during their studies: *“During my university classes, I studied the work of the World Conference on Environment held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992”, “I’ve learned of this concept at school, online, during extracurricular activities or debates about a company producing plastics (with reference to waste recycling and pollution reduction)”*. In addition to following the social responsibility campaigns of the retail chains they patronized, and analyzing the online stores and information provided by these stores, some young people focused their attention on specific types of activity: *“I’ve learned of this sustainability strategy in fields involving the use of technology. This development has a major effect on society as a result of implementing automated systems which provide quantity at high quality and thus satisfy consumers’ needs”; “I’ve learned of this concept in connection with the UN sustainable development goals and in the business area. I associate sustainable development with doing business responsibly, namely, what matters is not only the good operation but also the impact of the business”*.

Young people’s affinity with the online environment—an aspect already highlighted in the literature (Kraut et al. 2002; Issa and Isaias 2016; Dabija et al. 2019)—allowed them to be constantly and correctly informed about retailers’ changing strategies and actual measures taken with regard to sustainability. The Gen Zers adopted “green” behavior, favoring companies that delivered green products and services within the production as well as the distribution processes: *“I’ve learned of this subject in a company where production and the income received were being discussed”, “I’ve learned [of sustainability] in the context of a company’s expansion and production organization so that it may not harm the environment”, “This aspect was brought forth within a meeting in which various solutions at the workplace for greater responsibility towards the environment were being sought”*.

At the same time, these Generation Z members were aware of the effects of this phenomenon on society. They believed that there are solutions to reduce pollution, such as *“producing electric power by means of solar panels”, “showing care for the environment when putting up buildings”, “developing a region through European funds”, “developing a city through playground or park landscaping”*.

#### 4.2. Theme 2: Respondents’ Attitude to Sustainable Development

Respondents’ attitude to sustainability was assessed against their responsibility towards society and the environment. The answers show that a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the community in which one lives were not at a satisfactory level in the eyes of respondents: *“This type of responsibility and the sense of belonging (to society, in this case) are two very important aspects which, unfortunately, are little dealt with in Romania”, “More responsibility for better evolution of society is required”*.

*but this can only be achieved through education”, “Most consumers do not behave in a way that puts society and the environment at the forefront of their attention. I think individuals are mainly concerned with their immediate needs and desires, and do not care how a product is obtained or if its production harms the environment or if the product is really healthy to them and to other people (e.g., cigarettes)”.*

Most Gen Z members opined that people should use resources as responsibly as possible (*“I believe all consumers have the duty to be responsible as regards resource consumption and conservation and should not consume resources without thinking about the consequences of their actions”*) and also thought twice before using and/or wasting a resource (*“The perfect example is water. Although viewed as an unlimited resource, drinking water may become extremely scarce in certain areas because of irresponsible consumption. This is particularly true of factories and farms, whose production processes consume huge quantities of water which, in the end, is discharged into rivers and underground waters, thus affecting drinking water”*). The respondent’s example concerns water which, despite being viewed as an unlimited resource, is not potable everywhere. The above idea is also confirmed by studies conducted at international level. The fact is, drinking water supply may decrease considerably in certain areas of the planet because of irresponsible consumption, pollution, increased industrialization, and larger and larger areas used for intensive agriculture, where agricultural processes demand excessive water consumption (SDG.com 2019). Moreover, dirty water resulting from production processes is discharged into rivers as polluted water. Later, it permeates into the underground water and contaminates large areas, as well as the local communities using it. Naturally, it is the duty of environmental agencies and activists to “fight” this scourge, but, at the same time, consumers should contribute to discouraging such “unhealthy” intrusion into the environment. Consumers could not only adopt responsible consumption, but also boycott companies using such unfair practices: *“By our actions, we virtually lend support to certain industries and types of behavior. Supply and demand are the central paradigm of a free market, therefore, if demand disappears, supply and production naturally follow suit”*.

Some members of Generation Z believed that people are naturally inclined to self-centeredness, ignoring the effects their actions may have on the environment. *“Most consumers do not behave in a way that puts society and the environment at the forefront of their attention. I think individuals are mainly concerned with their immediate needs and desires, and do not care how a product is obtained or if its production harms the environment or if the product is really healthy to them and to other people”*. *“Lack of education”*, lack of a *“socially responsible consumption mentality”* and especially *“failure to take responsibility for environmentally harmful actions”* were among the most important factors identified by Generation Z members as the main causes of people’s negative attitude. Unlike Baby Boomers or Millennials, iGeneration tends to exhibit a proactive attitude (Choshaly 2017; Dabija et al. 2018a), eager to get deeply involved not only in countering the negative effects of pollution, but also in preventing, wherever possible, their appearance.

With respect to consumers’ attitude to the environment, Generation Z respondents believed that environmental protection and conservation is the duty of each one of us. Care for nature is thought of as a “reward” for the resources we receive and use on a daily basis in various activities: *“Social responsibility should characterize each individual”*, *“Society is made up of individuals. If the individual does not show it respect, he or she cannot expect to belong to a healthy society”*, *“All individuals should be responsible towards society”*.

To apply sustainability principles, developed from the need to protect the environment, respondents pointed to waste recycling, package reuse, and increased use of biodegradable materials. Individuals *“have the duty to get informed about materials and factors harming the environment and perform various activities such as recycling, use of renewable energy etc. to generate less environmentally harmful effects”*. At the same time, individuals *“should be more responsible, should recycle and should be aware of the risk posed to the planet”*, *“should use, as far as possible, biodegradable materials and try to recycle”*. The conclusion drawn by one respondent following investigation of the phenomenon is worth mentioning: *“each person may take care of the environment in his or her own way, whether he or she recycles, uses biodegradable/reusable materials or reduces the consumption of water/power/gas or many other resources”*.

#### 4.3. Theme 3: Uptake of Own Sustainable Behavior

A significant number of Gen Zers were already aware that, by the efforts made now, a better living may be ensured in the future, not only for one's own person but also for the community. *"By adopting responsible behavior, we secure for ourselves a better and healthier future. The more we pollute the greater the fall in our standard of living. If waste sorting were compulsory, its effects would be seen quite immediately, we would have cleaner oceans and forests and, consequently, qualitative products". "We depend on other people and on the quality of the environment, therefore, there is no other option. We could purchase environmentally friendly products, such as those with recyclable packaging, and do this more from small companies and less from big corporations".* By paying attention to the environment, protecting it, preserving resources, and adopting green consumption, as shown by [Dabija and Bejan \(2017a\)](#), current generations have the chance to look to their own future with confidence. Generation Z members were already aware that they cannot enjoy a fulfilling life in a polluted environment which affects the quality of everyday living.

The attention paid to society stems from citizens' responsibility. iGeneration believes that people should show responsibility in how they behave and what they buy every day. People's behavior can influence companies' economic situation in a negative or a positive way, and balance or unbalance market demand. *"Consumers should be responsible for their own good. They should get informed in advance about a product, its content, about the producing company and its behavior towards the environment. Consumer behavior may heavily influence the development of the local market by purchasing, for example, from local producers instead of supermarkets". "Consumers should be responsible and interested in the content, origin and way of delivery of the products they want to buy".*

Profit should not be the main goal of companies operating in the market. Young people believe that each company's business strategy should be centered around rewarding the community that contributes to the business development: *"the main objectives should take account of sustainable development", "they should be responsible so that their activity may not negatively impact society or the environment", "they should be responsible and measures taken to provide long-term help to society and the environment should be their main goal because (1) they are big consumer goods processors (with negative impact on the environment caused by goods transportation, large-scale use of plastic etc.), and (2) society will continue to be their source of income in the future and, therefore, they have to keep up with it", "they should be responsible and focus not only on profit but more on product quality and usage period".*

Rewarding of communities may be achieved through social responsibility campaigns, the role of which is to help needy families or the disadvantaged ([del Valle et al. 2019](#)). How people of our century choose to satisfy their desires influences companies' production processes and makes retailers change their initial strategies to suit the needs expressed by consumers: *"consumers should be responsible because as long as they buy from companies that show no respect to the environment, these companies have no reason to become more responsible", "I think individuals should be responsible, too, because they are the only ones able to have producers make real changes", "as this is the only way to strike a balance between the quantity of used resources and the end result, a balance which can hardly be found in our days".*

To assess the extent to which respondents not only adopted mentally, but also put into practice "sustainable behavior in relation to society and the environment", the Gen Zers were invited to provide actual examples to this effect. They mentioned that they often bought biodegradable bags *"buying biodegradable bags", "consuming green, biodegradable products", "I always look for products with paper or biodegradable plastic packaging"*, and stored waste in special recycling sites *"separate collection of paper and plastic waste for recycling", "separate collection of important waste as well as attention to substances discharged in water or sewerage systems (oils in particular)", "I throw rubbish in specially designed sites", "collection of household rubbish", "separate collection of waste", "use of recyclable materials. Throwing waste in places specially designed for this purpose"*, while they frequently used alternative sources of renewable energy *"I integrate energy regeneration solutions", "I've used solar energy"*, and opted for energy-saving LED bulbs *"I use LED bulbs instead of ordinary bulbs for my desk lamp", "I try not to waste water, food and power using energy-saving bulbs"*. Exhibiting a proactive attitude, iGeneration tends to get involved in the environmental actions of many non-governmental organizations *"I've taken part in campaigns*

such as *Let's Do It Romania*", "I've taken part in voluntary community service and in national activities such as *National Clean-Up Day-Let's Do It, Romania*", through which they become models for other people, colleagues and/or friends, trying to persuade them how important and relevant it is to adopt a new, environmentally-friendly lifestyle. The influence of reference groups was great among Generation Z members. Young people strive to be accepted by other people, sometimes leading to a change in behavior to fit the "model" provided by people whom they appreciate (Dabija et al. 2019).

#### 4.4. Theme 4: Criteria for Choosing Food and/or Non-Food Stores According to the Sustainability Measures They Implement

Gen Zers' care for the environment, individual responsibility towards society, and "green" behavior was reflected in their choice of food, clothing, shoes, electric and household appliances etc. stores from which they purchased products. Certainly, these stores were selected according to very precise criteria, such as retailers' green strategies translating into their care for socially responsible consumption, smaller packaging, and the use of green energy. Thus, consumers chose stores according to "retailers' green behavior, proximity, product quality, price level", "according to how sustainable they are, whether they test products on animals, recycle packaging", or if they learned of "a more green and sustainable store" they were likely to shop there. When choosing to shop from specific food retailers, consumers wanted to know about "product freshness, origin and price compared with other stores", "where they can find products as green as possible and at a fair price".

These significant aspects are also highlighted in the literature (Popp et al. 2018; Fogarassy et al. 2018; Bhattarai 2019). In fact, some respondents viewed retailers' effectively communicated green behavior as being more important than other criteria, such as product quality and price. "I generally choose stores according to my budget. However, I try to avoid any store that produces negative effects on the environment or buys from producers whose only purpose is making big profits regardless of whether they harm the environment or cause damage to consumers. As for electronic and household appliances, I try to choose those with low consumption."

Young people's concern for sustainable behavior was expressed not only during the purchase proper, but also during the selection of favorite products. Respondents considered aspects such as useless packaging, products packaged in plastic materials, the possibility of free home delivery, the repeated use of biodegradable bags, etc. "I avoid as far as possible buying plastic, single-use products, such as straws, because these are more difficult to recycle and might end up being thrown into oceans where they jeopardize the life of aquatic animals", "I mostly choose bio-based/green or easily recyclable products", "I choose biodegradable products", "I choose slightly processed and bio/plant-based products", "I do my best to replace plastic bags with cardboard or reusable bags".

Employees and managers should have the opportunity to interact with members of society in order to learn about, and understand society's social needs and expectations, and identify the most appropriate ways of putting things straight: "Many companies could undertake campaigns to prevent various negative aspects in society", "they should think of the long-term consequences that their business may have on the environment. That is why the concept of Social Corporate Responsibility was developed, focusing primarily on this kind of responsibility. For example, they should invest in schools and other organizations important to society", "I believe in the concept of CSR. There are companies already supporting activities such as creating parks, building electric recharging points etc."

Given people's taste for companies adopting green, sustainable development (Issa and Isaias 2016; Lan 2014; Dabija and Bejan 2017a), such actions could be a way of attracting customers, and of customers getting informed about the company's vision, actions and measures with respect to sustainability principles. Thus, "retailers/dealers should implement environment protection actions because this is how they encourage customers visiting their store to adopt similar behavior. A person having no idea heretofore about what sustainability means is likely to form an opinion about this concept after visiting the store due to the mere fact that the store is highly visible in promoting sustainability. Therefore, one can say that in

*some situations retailers/dealers may become sort of opinion-makers and supporting sustainability may be one such situation."*

At the same time, retailers should carry out their business with the help of employees. Members of Generation Z believed that care for "internal customers" must be reflected in the company's strategies (Vătămănescu et al. 2017) and become a major objective of any modern company. Therefore, companies "could launch social responsibility campaigns to protect the environment. Moreover, companies would enjoy greater success if they involved not only the employees but also the community. In this way, they would have the opportunity to "train" individuals concerning the significance of sustainability".

#### 4.5. Theme 5: The Importance Attached to Sustainability Dimensions (Social, Economic, and Environmental) in the Stores Where They Go Shopping

For companies, it is important that they understand the criteria according to which people make buying decisions. Many consumers continued to be attentive to the quality/price ratio of the products they purchase "quality, price and good delivered services", "previous experience, product quality, price", "quality followed by price", "according to product quality and price". There were also respondents who viewed retailers' care for the environment as the major factor determining their choice of store "retailers' green behavior".

The social dimension. Since pollution has reached new heights, consumers have started to be increasingly aware of the effects of this phenomenon on society as a whole, and on each person individually. Therefore, they have gradually shown a preference for companies that implement sustainability principles in their business and production processes, which is in harmony with the findings of many studies (Reshmi and Johnson 2014; Kirmani and Khan 2016; Dabija et al. 2018a). Consequently, when purchasing products, consumers showed high interest in the sustainable component of the decision-making process, since for some customers this component was the defining element of the actual purchasing decision: "I think of sustainable development when I see products with useless packaging which, in time, harms the environment. For example, toothpaste boxes are, in my opinion, utterly useless. I buy the product, unpack it and throw the box immediately. I think dealer could do something about it", "When I buy food I never think of sustainability; but I do think of it when I am ready to take my products home. I prefer buying or taking from home a cotton bag instead of a plastic bag", "when I go shopping, I ponder how many stores strive to promote sustainable development by reducing plastic consumption. Important steps are replacing plastic bags with paper (or other material) bags; bottled water producers use fewer plastic bottles", "I am thinking most of buying food which does not harm the environment, of packaging that can be recycled or was made of recyclable materials".

According to respondents, retail chains should become more heavily involved in social campaigns "many companies could initiate campaigns to stave off the various negative aspects of society", "companies should provide consumers with a positive example", "companies should offer alternatives to the pollution they create (planting new trees where they produced mass clear-cutting), and invest in NGOs doing ocean clean-up". Such development directions are already being followed by the companies which were aware in advance of this societal evolution (Gazzola et al. 2019). Getting involved in social responsibility actions should take place without impairing the quality of marketed products "first and foremost, they should offer people quality. Because it is the human being, not profit, which matters most", "they must meet consumers' demands", "they should be responsible and focus not only on profit but more on product quality and usage period", "they should strive to satisfy customers, gain the loyalty of old ones and draw new ones in order to achieve long-term sustainability", "offering quality and sustainable products now will end up having in the long term happy and satisfied customers who become loyal", "greater focus should be placed on quality".

The environmental dimension. Moreover, companies should adopt "a policy aimed at reducing consumption, and carry out activities which do not generate negative effects on the environment "affecting the environment as slightly as possible", "they should be responsible towards the environment to protect future generations", "they should think first of the environment because profit will not be long in coming in the end". Such opinions concur with the literature (Silva Braga Junior et al. 2015; Dabija and Bejan 2017b),

which underlines the importance of care for, and protection of the environment, socially responsible consumption, and reduction in the use of resources during production processes.

Respondents believed that protecting the environment is not a task that should be just the responsibility of companies or stakeholders involved in carrying out production or economic activities. In the opinion of the interviewees, the change must come from everyone. Thus, they *“must contribute to the protection of the environment, even through minor but significant long-term actions”, “must look at environmental issues much more seriously and show involvement in maintaining a healthy environment”*. In general, we can conclude that the existence of a healthy environment is synonymous with the life and good coexistence of individuals *“without a well-kept environment, individuals cannot exist, so it is their responsibility to preserve and protect it.”*

The economic dimension. Many respondents drew a parallel between sustainable and economic development. In their opinion, companies could influence the progress of society, having to *“organize their economic activity in such a way as not to harm the environment and not to waste”*. Equally, sustainability should be the leitmotif of companies when designing the *“economic development plan of a society over a long period of time”*. At the same time, it was clear that young people were very concerned with the *“functioning of the concept of sustainability in a company, financial sustainability”,* along with *“sustainability of macroeconomic fluctuations”,* being concepts more and more frequently mentioned *“in the context of the orientation towards sustainability”* of organizations.

#### 4.6. Theme 6: Favorite Retailers' Actions in Line with Sustainability Dimensions Which Respondents Are Aware of

A significant number of respondents were increasingly aware of retailers' concrete actions taken in line with social, environmental, and even economic dimensions of sustainable development, and chose stores according to these strategies. Thus, they had become “partners” of the stores that conduct sustainability campaigns and adjust their behavior accordingly. In fact, the research clearly reveals that they were aware of the precise actions taken by their favorite stores: *“<My mom recycles too>, campaign initiated by Auchan, which <challenges> you to collect cans and introduce them in a special machine (such as reverse vending machine) from which you get a shopping voucher whose value depends on the number of cans introduced”, “collection of used batteries—Carrefour”, “Domo: bringing an old appliance when buying a new one”*. Wishing to offer customers a good example, stores often conduct and support social responsibility campaigns with the aid of employees: *“Dedeman <We Plant Good Deeds in Romania> (planting a very large number of trees—over 300,000)”, “They could initiate social responsibility campaigns to protect the environment. Likewise, these campaigns would enjoy greater success if not only employees but also the community took part in them. Thus, companies would have the opportunity to “train” people concerning the significance of sustainability”*. To really change the mindset and provide well-rounded education, retail chains involve children as well, so that they may learn from an early age the importance of environmental protection: *“Auchan <Let's reduce our carbon footprint> (campaign aimed at teaching children about toxic gases, their negative impact on health and how this can be reduced)”*.

Respondents believed that sustainable development is the outcome of the joint effort of retailers, employees and customers *“I believe that retailers/dealers should implement environment protection actions because this is how they encourage customers visiting their store to adopt similar behavior. A person having no idea heretofore about what sustainability means is likely to form an opinion about this concept after visiting the store due to the mere fact that the store is highly visible in promoting sustainability. Therefore, one can say that in some situations, retailers/dealers may become sort of opinion-makers and supporting sustainability may be one such situation”*. In fact, the proper implementation of sustainability strategies can only be achieved through the synergy between stores/retail chains, customers, suppliers etc. These stores have the major role of “teaching” customers and of developing a green and/or sustainable consumption-oriented mindset (Kang and Hur 2012; Asgharian et al. 2017). Certainly, retailers *“have considerable power and can exercise it for the benefit of people and the environment. They should be careful about who supplies them, mindful of waste and recycling, should get involved in actions that counter the negative effects produced by*

industry so far. This can be done by making wise decisions and by providing society with information through contests and events”, “dealers could try to help the environment by purchasing recyclable products instead of other conventional products. Dealers are the middle position people making sure suppliers’ products reach consumers. If they did not buy environmentally harmful products, no one would buy them, except where supplier sells directly in small quantities, which is beyond his/her business purpose”, “I think producers should help maintain the environment through recycling processes because they are also part of society, therefore, the upkeep of society is for their benefit, too”. Respondents believe that the protection of nature should be not only a strategy, but also a properly regulated moral obligation imposed upon retailers “clear laws should compel retailers to get involved in environment protection. Unfortunately, their top priority is profit, leading to disregard for environment protection. If law allows dealers to sell whatever they want without taking care of environment protection, they will not change their sales policy at the expense of profit. I think lawmakers are more important than dealers”.

Certainly, the change of mindset in favor of environmental protection and support of social responsibility should come mostly from employees (Javadein et al. 2011). Respondents opined that employees are the ones translating into practice the company’s vision and mission, “delivering” the message to customers, and persuading them to prefer and shop in a particular store (or not). A satisfied employee will have appeal for consumers and, in the end, the entire company will have the same appeal: “a healthy employee financially satisfied with his/her work generates long-term sustainability for the retailer’s business”, “an employee experiencing workplace fulfilment will work more effectively”, “employees have to be satisfied with the working conditions to feel motivated to go to work with pleasure”, “employers should ensure the welfare of employees to provide them with a friendly working environment. This can be achieved by team-building and events aimed at strengthening the employer-employee relationship”, “dealers should be concerned with employees’ working conditions and life standard because these must lead a decent life in order to work joyfully and diligently”, “dealers should be concerned with employees’ working conditions and life standard because a happy employee may turn into a more productive employee”.

## 5. Conclusions

This study conducted among Generation Z members shows their interest in various aspects of sustainability when going shopping. Being aware of the significance of this concept, they monitor how sustainability principles are incorporated into the business of food and non-food retail chains where they go shopping. Economically, iGeneration believe that retailers have a great opportunity to attract a lot of custom and be successful in their targeted markets if they only pursue sustainable profit through greater care for the environment, environmental protection, and preservation of resources. They can achieve this by implementing concrete actions and measures aimed at improving the welfare of society and of the communities in which they do business, as well as the welfare of their own employees. The support given to “internal customers” is reflected in their desire to work, so that stores may have enough skilled and well-trained staff to conduct social responsibility campaigns and help the local community. The research also reveals that Gen Zers have a favorable attitude to responsible retailers that conduct themselves according to sustainable principles not only in marketing, but also in producing green products.

Knowing and understanding what customers want, and considering these aspects when designing business strategies represents a key point in the customer binding process, and in gaining their loyalty. Zers who develop a predilection for sustainable principles and their implementation in daily activities or organizations tend to return to stores that have gained their trust and through their measures display a constant concern for environmental protection. Encouraging recycling, packaging reuse (wherever possible) or change in packaging are only a few aspects customers prefer and use as criteria for choosing stores for future shopping. These methods prove the intention of organizations to develop among consumers a long-term sustainable behavior.

The research shows that the lack of involvement in environmental protection observed in Romania is the result of poor education. People are not informed in an organized manner about the effects of

pollution and how they can help reduce this phenomenon. Being aware of how important each of us is within society increases self-esteem. This stirs the individual to get involved in sustainable actions, knowing that he/she contributes to a better life for future generations.

Given the lack of public spirit, Generation Z youth believe that changing legislation and regulating how sustainability principles should be applied will benefit society, because compulsoriness leads to greater company involvement in supporting sustainable strategies. In like manner, the research shows that retailers' asking for "help" from customers through social responsibility campaigns may be the key to creating a community that shows concern for the environment, taking the necessary steps to protect it.

From a theoretical perspective, the research is an overview of Gen Zers' experience with their favorite retailers, clarifying their attitude to the favorite stores where they go shopping. At the same time, the research makes possible the preview of consumers' unbiased opinion about reality and about the sustainable actions of stores when developing offers for an emerging market. The challenge for Gen Zers lies in carrying out actions leading to the involvement of people from other generations as well (Y or X). This would force companies operating in the Romanian market to offer products that meet consumers' demands.

From a managerial perspective, the paper gives retail chain managers an overview of the sustainable criteria according to which young people, members of Generation Z, decide to make purchases from retail stores, and of their attitude to, and expectations from green organizations. In fact, the themes discussed in the research can be taken as possible good practice guides useful to retailers when developing and/or rethinking sustainable strategies for approaching target segments. The research also points out the weaknesses of the analyzed companies perceived by consumers, and often shows the lines of action that stores should follow, and the aspects they should improve, to be more successful with customers. According to the results obtained, "responsibility" and "involvement" became leitmotifs in the present research and can also play the same role in the strategies adopted by retailers.

Retailers should also change their business strategies regarding the proper education of consumers towards the principles of sustainable development. Often, involvement of consumers in daily life and environmental protection actions and measures become topics of great importance within "social responsibility campaigns". A proactive and sustainable organizational behavior might help consumers to be more aware of the consequences of their actions and their impact on society. Zers are young people who want to be actively involved in their communities, being receptive to any stimuli and novel ideas that might arise during their lives. Therefore, involving them in any sustainable campaigns might be the proper way to develop a correct mentality towards the established goals. This might also "open" a communication channel with members of other generations, by transmitting the importance and relevance of sustainable practices in society.

The research has its limits, too. One of these is the survey of only Generation Z members. Future research could also approach other generations and/or make cross-generational comparisons with Millennials and/or Generation X members. Another limit of the research is the fact that we only took into consideration Gen Z opinions from an emerging market. Future papers might consider not only a cross-generational approach, but also a cross-cultural one, comparing, for instance, perceptions of Generation Z members from other Central and Eastern European Countries or from Western versus Eastern European Countries. A third limit lies in the fact that we did not ask respondents to draw a clear delineation between food and non-food retailers' sustainable actions and strategies.

Future research could make a comparative analysis of the sustainable behavior and attitude of other consumer generations when buying from retail stores and build generational profiles for each surveyed area. The differences between the analyzed cohorts could be better identified and presented. At the same time, we believe it necessary to conduct a quantitative research study on Gen Z members' perception of sustainability dimensions in food versus non-food retail, and/or to identify the extent to which their previous experience, together with stimuli from retailers, may or may not foster loyal



behavior. As this research used a qualitative approach, future studies could also try to investigate these concepts from a quantitative perspective. Respondents could be asked to assess specific sustainable actions/measures implemented by either food or non-food retailers, or they could focus, for instance only on one retail sector and/or format (DIY retailers, hypermarkets etc.). Furthermore, future studies could draw on the factors that affect the sustainability orientation of Generation Z members, and could highlight how this orientation evolves over time. It would also be possible to identify the satisfaction and/or loyalty of respondents depending on the sustainable actions implemented by retailers.

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