

## **The Climate-Conscious Generation: The Influence of Sustainability Education and Influencers on Generation Z's Climate Responsibility**

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**Abstract:** This study examines how prior education and influencers impact sustainability awareness among Generation Z in Slovakia. Generation Z is crucial to shaping trends around renewable energy, sustainable fashion, and responsible consumption. Their purchasing decisions are influenced by various factors. While previous research has highlighted the role of education and influencers in fostering socially responsible behaviors, few studies focus specifically on this topic. A survey among 412 respondents was conducted to explore the relationship between education, influencer impact, and the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle. The results show that mainly influencers significantly affect responsible awareness of environmental and social issues. These findings offer valuable information for policymakers, educators, and marketers on how to effectively leverage education and influencers to promote sustainability in Slovakia.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Generation Z, Influencers, Prior Education

**JEL Classification codes:** M31, Q56, I25

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2015, the United Nations launched the Sustainable Development Goals, a set of 17 global goals aimed at achieving a sustainable future for all. Education has been widely recognized as a crucial tool in achieving these goals, as it can empower individuals to make informed and responsible decisions for the environment (Nguyen et al., 2022). The younger generation, particularly millennials and Generation Z, is often touted as the driving force behind the push for sustainable development (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021).

The relevance of sustainability education and the influence of climate activists, such as Greta Thunberg, on the environmental awareness and actions of Generation Z have been explored in several studies. These studies suggest that Generation Z, as digital natives, are more engaged with environmental issues through social media and are more likely to take pro-environmental actions (Anwar, 2019; Melissa & Sari, 2020). However, the extent to which this generation is truly driving sustainable development remains a topic of ongoing research and debate (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021).

Gen Z possesses significant sustainable development competencies, which positively influence their attitudes toward green consumption values (Cyfert et al., 2024). Access to diverse sources of sustainability knowledge enhances their understanding and engagement with sustainable practices (Cyfert et al., 2024). Generation Z, also known as the "digital natives", are the demographic cohort born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Anwar, 2019). This generation has been exposed to environmental issues and sustainability from a young age, as they have grown up in an era of heightened global awareness of climate change and the need for sustainable development. Several studies have explored the environmental attitudes and behaviors of Generation Z, with mixed findings. One study found that Generation Z in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, tend to believe that social media is more important than the real world, which could hinder their engagement with real-world environmental issues (Anwar, 2019). However, another study conducted in Japan suggests that the younger generation, including millennials and Generation Z, is more likely to adopt sustainable lifestyles and is a driving force towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021).

On the other hand, there is also noted reluctance among Gen Z to engage deeply with sustainability topics, indicating a need for incentives to foster greater involvement (Mock et al., 2024). Despite high environmental awareness, Gen Z often prefers fast fashion due to its affordability and trendiness, revealing a contradiction in their consumption behaviors (Escourido-Calvo et al., 2025).

This study aims to investigate the role of sustainability education and climate influencers in shaping Generation Z's attitudes and behaviors towards environmental responsibility. Specifically, we focus on the perception of this topic from the perspective of students in Slovakia, where this topic remains insufficiently explored.

## **1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several factors influence purchasing behavior, particularly among Generation Z, a group known for its values-driven consumption (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Among these factors, sustainability education and influencers play a crucial role (Jones & Confort, 2020). Education shapes awareness and knowledge about sustainable practices, empowering young consumers to make informed decisions (Smith, 2019). Meanwhile, influencers serve as key opinion leaders, translating sustainability messages into engaging, relatable content that resonates with Gen Z's digital-first lifestyle. The combination of formal education and digital influence significantly impacts whether and how young consumers engage in sustainable shopping behavior. Gen Z, as digital natives, are influenced by social media and educational frameworks that emphasize sustainability. Their awareness of environmental issues and ethical consumption is shaped by influencers advocating for climate responsibility, driving their commitment to sustainable practices and informed decision-making (Generation Z, 2023).

### **The impact of prior education**

Education significantly influences consumers' environmental attitudes and behaviors by enhancing their knowledge and awareness of sustainability issues. This relationship is evident across various contexts, as education fosters eco-friendly shopping habits, promotes responsible consumption, and shapes attitudes towards environmental protection. According to Lee and Hung (2024), education significantly impacts consumers' eco-friendly shopping habits, as evidenced by studies in Indonesia and Taiwan, where increased knowledge about non-disposable products led to more sustainable purchasing behaviors. Schools that incorporate sustainability into their curricula, such as healthy eating initiatives, positively impact students' behaviors and community engagement (Tonis et al., 2024). According to Yulistiana (2022), there is a positive relationship between knowledge of environmental pollution and responsible environmental behavior. This suggests that increasing awareness

and understanding of environmental issues can enhance individual responsibility and pro-environmental actions.

There is often a gap between environmental knowledge and actual pro-environmental behavior, highlighting the need for targeted educational strategies (Goldman et al., 2020). These may vary depending on whether the education is intended for primary, secondary, or higher education institutions. Experiential training in high schools has shown to elevate students' understanding of sustainable practices, resulting in long-term changes in consumption behavior and increased awareness of environmental issues (Betzler & Kempen, 2024). According to Piao & Managi (2023), education not only fosters sustainable behaviors but also contributes to economic development, as individuals with higher education levels tend to adopt more sustainable lifestyles and practices. Higher educational levels correlate with increased environmentally friendly behaviors, such as recycling and energy conservation, indicating that education enhances awareness and action towards sustainability (Piao & Managi, 2023). A focus on sustainability education helps Gen Z develop a strong orientation towards environmental stewardship, preparing them for leadership roles in sustainable development.

The relationship between education and sustainable awareness is multifaceted, highlighting the critical role of educational initiatives in fostering environmentally and socially responsible actions. Research indicates that educational programs, particularly those focused on sustainability, significantly influence individuals' intentions and behaviors towards sustainable practices. This connection can be explored through various dimensions, including pedagogical approaches, environmental knowledge, and socio-economic factors. Based on the above literature review, we formulate the following hypothesis.

- H1: Previous education in the field of sustainability has a positive impact on Generation Z's attitudes toward sustainability.

#### The impact of sustainability-focused influencers

Influencers play a crucial role in disseminating environmental messages, making climate issues relatable and urgent for Gen Z, thus enhancing their pro-environmental behavior (Wijaya & Kokchang, 2023). Influencers leverage social media to raise environmental awareness, significantly impacting Generation Z's green purchase intentions (Mudasir & Malik, 2025). The effectiveness of influencers is heightened when they advocate for sustainable practices, as their perceived credibility can enhance consumer trust and encourage sustainable choices (Mudasir & Malik, 2025; Jain, 2024).

For example, in the context of sustainable fashion, influencers can shift attitudes towards eco-friendly options, addressing the environmental impacts of fast fashion and promoting sustainable alternatives (Ge, 2024). Influencers can help mitigate negative perceptions associated with secondhand shopping, promoting it as a fashionable and sustainable choice, thus encouraging Gen Z to embrace this option (Boyer et al., 2024). Campaigns featuring influencers can leverage social proof to reduce stigma and enhance acceptance of sustainable fashion choices among Generation Z (Boyer et al., 2024). The beauty sector sees a preference for brands that genuinely focus on sustainability, with community reviews and influencer opinions playing a crucial role in shaping their purchasing decisions (Sagar et al., 2025). Based on the above literature review, we formulate the following hypothesis.

- H2: Generation Z's attitudes toward sustainability are formed by following sustainability-focused influencers.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This paper presents the results of a research study aimed at identifying the attitudes and consumer behavior of Generation Z in relation to sustainable consumption. The study seeks to explore not only the general perceptions of sustainability among young consumers but also the key factors influencing their purchasing decisions, behavioral patterns, and the extent to which sustainability considerations impact their daily consumption choices.

The research was conducted in 2024 among university students from across Slovakia, providing a focused perspective on an important demographic segment known for its increasing influence on market trends and environmental awareness. The data collection process was carried out using the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method, ensuring efficient reach. A total of 412 respondents recruited from first and fourth-year university students by the cluster sampling method, all belonging to Generation Z (aged 18–24), participated in the survey, representing diverse regions of Slovakia.

The questionnaire was designed to comprehensively examine multiple aspects of sustainable consumption. It included a series of structured and semi-structured questions aimed at understanding respondents' attitudes toward sustainability, the sources of their environmental awareness, and their actual consumption behaviors. Additionally, the survey sought to identify potential gaps between their expressed values and real-world purchasing habits, providing valuable insights into the practical implications of sustainability within this generation.

By analyzing the collected data, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Generation Z in Slovakia perceives and engages with sustainability.

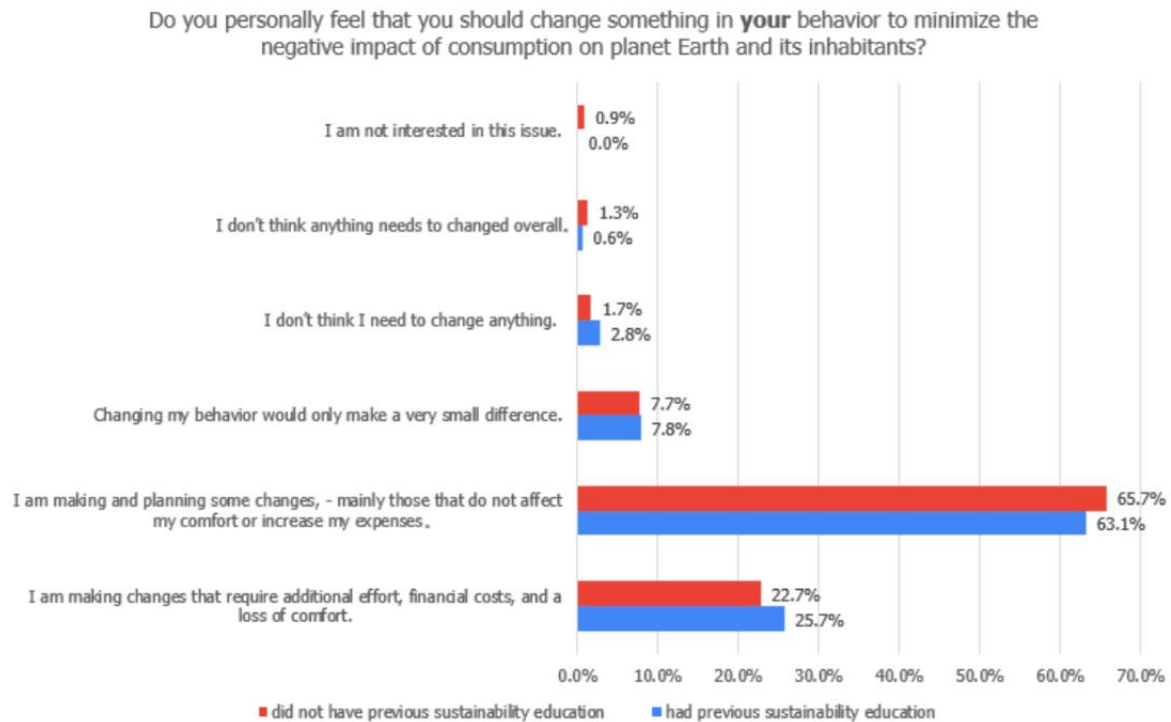
## **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The role of education and influencers in shaping the environmental attitudes and behaviors of Generation Z has been highlighted in the previous text in several studies. Subsequently, we will examine the results among Slovak students.

### **3.1 The impact of prior education to Gen ' Z sustainability in Slovakia**

Previous education was examined through the question: "As far as you remember, did you attend any classes, courses, or educational programs focused on sustainability during your previous studies (at secondary school or university)?" A total of 43.4% of respondents answered yes. The following section presents the results of two key survey questions related to students' perceptions of their role in sustainable consumption. The first question explores whether respondents feel the need to change their behavior to reduce the negative environmental impact of their consumption. The second question examines whether they actively consider shopping more sustainably. The findings, visualized in the accompanying graphs (Figure 1 and Figure 2), provide insight into students' awareness of their consumer impact and their willingness to adopt more sustainable shopping habits.

**Fig. 1 Influence of previous sustainability education on willingness to make efforts toward sustainable behavior**



Source: proceedings of authors' primary data

A group of Generation Z students with prior education in sustainability demonstrated a slightly higher willingness to invest effort, financial resources, and personal comfort to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle compared to those without such education. However, a chi-square test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.685$ ).

**Fig. 2 Influence of previous sustainability education on willingness to shop more sustainably**



Source: proceedings of authors' primary data

Students with prior education in sustainability demonstrate a greater inclination to consider sustainability in their shopping decisions compared to those without such education. However, a chi-square test indicates that this difference is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.216$ ). Based on this result, we cannot confirm or reject the hypothesis H1: Previous education in the field of sustainability has a positive impact on Generation Z's attitudes toward sustainability. The reasons for the lack of confirmation of the impact of previous education on students' attitudes toward sustainability in Slovakia may be as follows.

First, the quality and depth of sustainability education may vary significantly across institutions, leading to inconsistent learning outcomes. An interesting finding was that only 19.4% of respondents in our questionnaire were familiar with and able to define the term Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Environmental education is a mandatory part of educational programs in Slovakia, from kindergartens to secondary schools. It is implemented as a cross-curricular topic, meaning that its content is integrated into various subjects. In primary and secondary schools, environmental topics are incorporated into school curricula, allowing schools to emphasize environmental aspects within different subjects or create a separate subject focused on environmental education. Some schools also design their educational programs with an environmental emphasis, highlighting the importance of environmental protection and sustainability (MINEDU, 2019). Despite the mandatory inclusion of environmental education in school curricula, its implementation in practice varies. According to 2019 data, environmental education in primary schools was most often integrated into subject content (94.3% of monitored schools), while only 13% of schools offered a separate subject focusing on environmental issues. Some schools also formally included environmental education without creating the necessary conditions to achieve their specific goals (MINZP, 2019). The digital native characteristics of Generation Z, coupled with the increasing integration of digital technologies in education, have opened new avenues for exploring the impact of digital technology on the learning characteristics of this generation. The study on the "Application of Digital Technology and the Learning Characteristics of Generation Z in Higher Education" suggests that the use of digital technology has become an essential part of the daily routine of Gen Z, and this change has implications for how they engage with and learn about environmental issues.

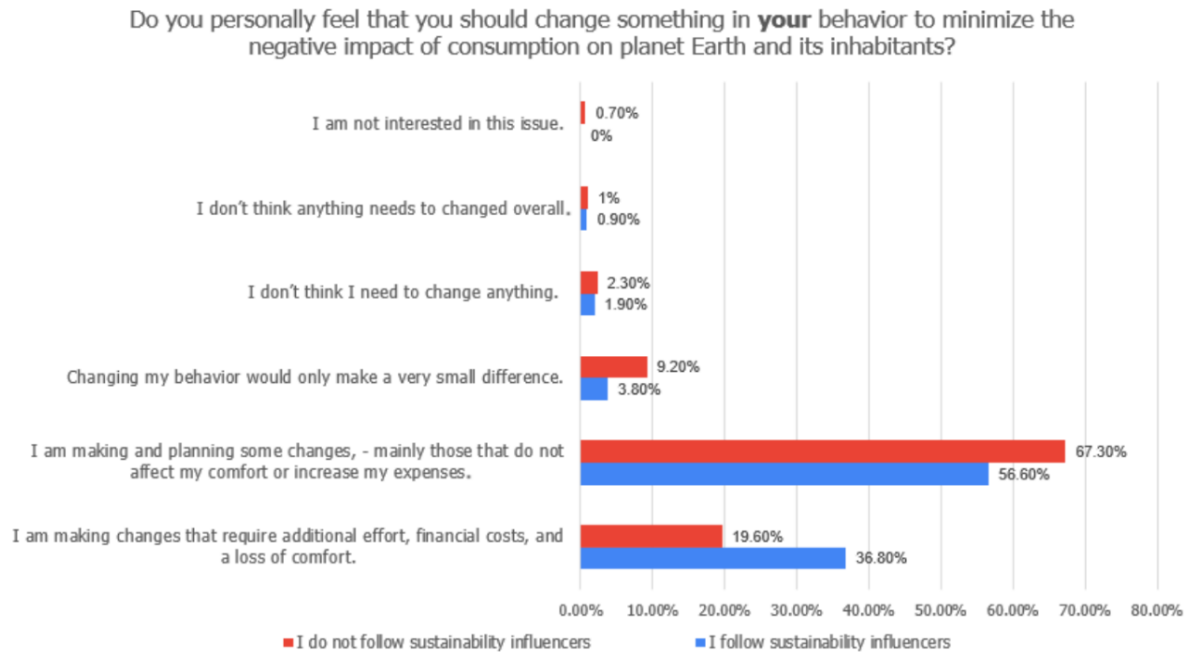
Second, the practical application of sustainability knowledge may be insufficient, meaning that even if students attended relevant courses, they may not have translated this knowledge into real-world behavior. The perception of Generation Z towards corporate social responsibility programs, particularly in the field of education, has also been investigated. The study found that Generation Z has a positive perception of such programs, indicating their interest in and support for sustainability initiatives.

Third, external influences such as social norms, peer behavior, or media exposure might play a stronger role in shaping students' attitudes toward sustainability than formal education alone.

### 3.2 The impact of social media influencers to Gen´ Z sustainability in Slovakia

We asked the same questions as in the previous case, but in relation to influencers (Figure 3 and Figure 4). To the question "Do you follow any influencers who address sustainability issues?", 25.7% of respondents answered yes.

**Fig. 3 The influence of social media influencers on willingness to make efforts toward sustainable behavior**



Source: proceedings of authors' primary data

The difference between Generation Z individuals who follow influencers promoting sustainability-related content and those who do not was analyzed using a chi-square test, which confirmed that the observed differences were statistically significant ( $p = 0.001$ ). The findings suggest that young people who engage with sustainability-focused influencers have a greater awareness of the sacrifices associated with sustainable practices, recognizing that sustainability often requires compromising personal comfort. Furthermore, they demonstrate a higher willingness to invest time, energy, and financial resources into adopting sustainable behaviors.

**Fig. 4 The impact of social media influencers on willingness to shop more sustainably**



Source: proceedings of authors' primary data

The distinction between Generation Z individuals who follow influencers promoting sustainability and those who do not was analyzed using a chi-square test, which revealed a statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.001$ ). The findings suggest that young people who engage with sustainability-focused influencers are more likely to consider sustainability in their shopping decisions.

Based on these results, the hypothesis H2: "Following sustainability-focused influencers has a positive impact on Generation Z's attitudes toward sustainability" is supported. This is an interesting finding, as there are not many influencers in Slovakia focusing on sustainability. As previously mentioned, only a quarter of respondents follow them. Their names and frequency are presented in Table 1.

**Tab. 1 Sustainability social media influencers in Slovakia**

Name of influencer	Country	Frequency
Natália Pažická	Slovakia	22
Moma	Slovakia	3
Viktor Vincze	Slovakia	2
Michal Sabo	Slovakia	2
Milan bez mapy	Slovakia	1
Stella McCartney	United Kingdom	1
Greta Thunberg	Finland	2
Moby	USA	1

Source: authors' proceedings

Similarly, students also mentioned other lesser-known influencers or various initiatives such as PETA, Plant Based News, and Mercy for Animals. Commercial companies promoting sustainable brands were recorded only minimally.

Jain (2024) points out that, while influencers play a crucial role in promoting sustainability, there is a risk of superficial engagement, where the authenticity of their advocacy may be questioned. This highlights the need for genuine partnerships that resonate with the values of Generation Z to foster lasting behavioral change. According to Zatwarnicka-Madura et al. (2022), influencers have a limited impact on Generation Z's climate responsibility, as they prefer expert opinions, particularly from the energy sector. Education levels also play a role, with students showing greater awareness of green energy compared to their less-educated peers. Tao et al. (2024) highlight that emotionally evocative viral videos can effectively engage Generation Z, promoting problem recognition and motivation to act on climate change. This suggests that influencers and educational content can significantly enhance climate responsibility among this demographic.



## CONCLUSION

This study explores the impact of sustainability education and influencers on Generation Z's climate responsibility in Slovakia. The findings indicate that while sustainability education raises awareness and knowledge, its direct influence on sustainable consumer behavior is limited. In contrast, influencers play a more substantial role in shaping attitudes and behaviors, as demonstrated by the statistically significant differences between respondents who follow sustainability-focused influencers and those who do not. This suggests that Generation Z in Slovakia relies heavily on digital sources for sustainability-related information, reinforcing the importance of social media in environmental advocacy. Despite the mandatory inclusion of environmental education in school curricula, inconsistencies in content depth and practical application may contribute to its limited impact on behavioral change. Furthermore, external factors such as peer influence, social norms, and media exposure appear to have a more pronounced effect on sustainable behavior than formal education alone. This highlights the need for more experiential and engaging educational approaches that translate knowledge into action. Given the growing influence of digital media, future research should further examine the role of influencers in fostering long-term behavioral changes rather than temporary engagement. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons could provide insights into how sustainability education and influencer marketing vary across different contexts. Policymakers, educators, and marketers should consider leveraging influencers strategically and integrating interactive sustainability education programs to foster genuine and lasting environmental responsibility among Generation Z. One limitation of this study is that although the sample consists of university students who belong to Generation Z, it does not fully represent the diversity of this generational cohort. The respondents were first-year university students, which means that their attitudes and knowledge about sustainability may have been shaped primarily by their secondary education. As a result, the influence of university-level education — especially programs that actively integrate sustainability into their curricula — was not captured in this study. Future research could explore whether higher education with a strong emphasis on sustainability has a greater impact on the sustainable consumption behavior of young people.

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