

To explore Generation Z's attitudes
towards purchasing plant-based milk
alternatives.

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1. Abstract

This study investigates Generation Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk alternatives to help marketing practitioners and academics understand the implications of their attitudes, to assess which approach may work best to promote PBM.

Existing research indicates that climate change, social media influencers, and friends have significantly impacted Generation Z's attitudes toward sustainable and responsible behaviour. However, it is unclear whether there is a direct and demonstrable link between GenZ's attitudes toward sustainability and their immediate consumption of PBM.

However, Gen Z's attitudes towards purchasing PBM are under-researched.

This study consisted of six semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the Gen Z cohort who consume PBM.

The findings revealed that those participants who had a broad understanding of the ethicality of PBM products and brands' purchasing decisions were heavily influenced by the climate crisis. Brand loyalty is high in the sector, and availability is an essential factor for GenZ when making purchasing decisions with PBM. Participants in the study also expressed a desire to learn more about their environmental impacts.

As a result, marketing practitioners must address environmental issues and be informative regarding the effects of the climate crisis.

2. Introduction

The purpose of this research report is to examine the academic literature surrounding factors affecting consumers and, more specifically, Generation Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk alternatives. The literature findings will be tested through primary qualitative research on consumers from the Generation Z cohort who consume plant-based milk, to gain a better understanding of their attitudes. Generation Z makes up 31% of the world's population (Schroeder, 2019) and is the cohort that consumes the most plant-based milk, illustrating the importance of this topic for marketers. However, marketers should not treat Generation Z as a unified group, as each individual will have differing attitudes. This study aims to provide in-depth insights into the drivers and barriers towards drinking plant-based milk among Generation Z; however, it must be acknowledged that there are limitations due to the limited sample size (see 3.8).

The objectives for this research study are as follows:

1. To explore the influence of trends on GenZ's attitudes towards purchasing PBM.
2. To explore the role media and peer suggestions effect GenZ's attitudes in purchasing PBM.
3. To explore the attitude-behaviour gap in buying PBM.
4. To understand the effect that barriers have on GenZ's attitudes towards purchasing PBM.

3. Review of the relating literature

3.1 Gen Z

GenZ is the generational cohort aged 11-24 or born between 1996 and 2010 (Fromm and Read, 2018). Generational cohorts are groups of individuals born during the same period who experience similar events in their formative years and therefore share similar attitudes, values and beliefs (Lyon et al., 2005). Alwin's (2003) theory of 'cohort replacement' as a generational marketing tool makes several critical assumptions, including the impressionable youth, individual persistence, unique cohort experiences, and social change. During GenZ's formative years, several significant events occurred, including global terrorism, the great recession, climate change, and technological advances (Fromm and Read, 2018; Williams and Page, 2011). Although the theory of 'cohort replacement' illustrates the possibility for commonality among generations, this potential can only be realised if the cohort has similar subjective experiences of history and evokes the same attitudes to those events. Thus, one cannot propose that events during GenZ's formative years will have influenced all individuals in that cohort.

3.2 Influences on Gen Z's shopping habits

Members of GenZ are society's true "digital natives", from their earliest youth, they have been exposed to the internet, social media, and mobile systems (Sladek and Grabinger, 2014; Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Research by the UK Government (BritainThinks, 2019) found that online adverts, social media, and peer suggestions are the three most significant influences on purchasing decisions amongst GenZ. The

Gratification Theory suggests that young adults follow social influencers to seek information relevant to their lives (Croes and Bartels, 2021). Furthermore, Beacom et al. (2021) suggests that social media influencers motivate consumers to change their dietary patterns to become more sustainable. However, The Gratification Theory also indicates that young people follow social influencers to fit in with their peers (Lin et al., 2018), suggesting GenZ are influenced by peer suggestions as they “fear being ‘called out’ for having the ‘wrong’ opinions” (BritainThinks, 2019). Research from IRI (2021) reveals that 59% of participants agreed that recommendations from friends and family had the most significant influence on their purchasing habits. Thus, illustrating that social media influencers influence GenZ to increase their awareness of sustainable consumption, and peers have a more decisive effect on their purchasing decisions.

3.3 Attitude Behaviour Gap

Climate change is a unique cohort experience for GenZ; therefore, it is unsurprising that GenZ has strongly stated beliefs to behave responsibly and sustainably. A Pew research report found that climate change is one GenZ’s biggest societal concerns (Tyson, 2021). However, 1000 self-selecting ‘eco conscious’ GenZ consumers said health is more important than the environment (BritainThinks, 2019). Thus, illustrating that ‘pro-environmental behaviours’ could result from social media creating pressure on GenZ to have the ‘right’ opinion and conform to social norms (Beacom et al., 2021). Tajfel’s (1979) Social Identity Theory suggests people adopt the identity of the group they categorize themselves as belonging to. This supports that GenZ may be stating that they behave sustainably on social media as they have

been classified as pivotal in the drive to combat climate change. However, these sustainable attitudes may not reflect in their actions.

3.4 Drivers influencing Gen Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk

Several research studies have explored the trends that influence GenZ's attitudes towards purchasing sustainable products. The researcher Klapp (2020) has investigated how environmental concerns have become a key driver in shifting consumers attitudes on their dairy intake, particularly due to the climate crisis gaining increased prominence in the media. Being environmentally friendly is part of GenZ's identity and how they want to be perceived (Mintel, 2020). Therefore, it is foreseeable that conscious consumerism resonates most with GenZ shoppers (Greenstein, 2019). This growing awareness of conscious consumerism, especially among older GenZ shoppers and media attention on the climate crisis, illustrates the reason for a continued rise in sales of PBM (Parrish, 2018). Contrarily, a qualitative study by Food Standards Agency (2020) found that most GenZ participants had never thought about the effect of food systems on climate change. Further, Kamenidoi et al. (2019) researched 252 university students in Greece and found that GenZ doesn't usually eat sustainably but rather attempt to eat locally and seasonally. However, this study has significant limitations, including the restricted number of participants and all participants being Greek; therefore, limiting scope.

There has been a growing link in the consumer's mind between the health of the planet and his or her own health (Cooper, 2017). Rogers (2019) stated that the healthy halo effect around nuts and plants proteins demonstrates the reason for the rising

consumption of PBM. Likewise, McCarthy et al. (2017) identified nutritional attributes of importance to customers when choosing PBM. Conversely, Swati et al. (2016) researched several milk alternatives and found a lack of nutritional balance compared to dairy milk. Park (2021) further supports this research and states that PBM "cannot replace the superior nutritional and health values of natural milk". Illustrating an unknowingness of whether PBM can reflect the nutritional benefits of dairy milk.

3.5 Barriers influencing Gen Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk

There is extensive research into the barriers to sustainable consumption, including consumers being unacquainted with sustainable consumption, price, and lack of immediate availability (Geipel et al., 2018 and Terlau and Hirsch, 2015). However, price is the only barrier that has been extensively explored when analysing GenZ. Barriers for consumers consuming a plant-based diet include unfamiliarity with products, availability, and affordability (Beacom et al., 2021). A qualitative study on GenZ by Food Standards Agency (2020) found that participants feel environmentally friendly behaviours are out of their reach due to price pressures. Moreover, GenZ grew up in the shadow of economic recessions, leaving them indelibly frugal (Du and Milligan, 2019). Conversely, Holman (2020) suggests that GenZ shoppers are willing to pay more for sustainable brands, and First Insight's (2019) survey found that the majority were willing to pay a 10% premium for sustainable products.

3.6 Research Gap

Many recent studies have explored Generation Z's attitudes towards sustainable consumption (Ching-Hui et al., 2019; Kamenidoi et al. 2019). However, there is still a lack of literature dealing with GenZ's attitudes towards purchasing PBM. Including who influences GenZ to buy PBM, whether there is a gap in how GenZ portrays themselves as climate activists compared to how they behave and whether the climate crisis has influenced their attitude towards purchasing PBM. Further limitations in the literature include whether the health benefits influence GenZ's attitudes and whether price and availability are barriers towards GenZ purchasing PBM. This study will address these gaps and contribute to current literature on the influences affecting GenZ's attitudes towards purchasing PBM through in-depth qualitative interviews.

4. Data Collection

4.1 Research Design

The data used in this study comes from both primary and secondary sources. As a result of the literature review, interview questions were structured accordingly (See Appendix 2).

4.2 Sampling

To select the most suitable participants for the research, the researcher used a non-probability homogenous sampling method (Etikan et al., 2015). The researcher purposively selected six participants for the qualitative study, who were all known drinkers of PBM and friends of the researcher. Participants are members of Generation Z, born between 1999 and 2000, with an age range of 21-22. Please see appendix 1 for participant profiles.

4.3 Data Collection

Participants were interviewed using semi-structured in-depth interviews, which lasted 30-40 minutes. A combination of to face and zoom interviews were used. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed precisely. During interviews, photo-elicitation and websites were used to evoke comments from participants.

4.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used by the researcher, to identify patterns from the interview data. After transcribing the interviews, the data was coded and then the themes were reviewed and defined.

4.5 Validity

Validity refers to how accurately a method measures what it was intended to measure to answer research objectives (Saunders et al, 2019, p.361). To ensure participants were well informed about the study's purpose and expectations, a participant information sheet was sent out prior to interviews. Please see Appendix 3.

4.6 Reliability

Reliability is the extent to which the data collection technique will yield consistent findings (Saunders et al., 2019, p.815). Participant validation was implemented to explore the credibility of results and ensure that participants believed that the results were accurate.

4.7 Ethics

The Oxford Brookes code of ethical conduct was followed throughout. Participants were provided with a privacy notice and consent documents, which detailed that all interviews would be recorded with their consent. Please see Appendix 4.

4.8 Limitations

Limitations for this study including the sample size and that all participants consume PBM. To gain a more generalised over, future research could be done to explore non-PBM drinker's attitudes towards PBM. A further limitation of this study was that through purposively sampling friends to take part in the research, there is a potential for participant bias.

5. Findings and Discussion

Responses from the interviews were transcribed and then in-vivo coding and theory driven coding were used to summarise the key findings of the interviews. a thematic analysis technique was applied to the data, to identify key themes, which address Generation Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk. Please see Appendix 5 for exemplar of interview.

5.1 Sustainability and Ethics

Participants who stated that the climate crisis and animal cruelty were big motivators in their decision to switch to PBM (P1 and P6) both had extensive knowledge on the environmental impacts of dairy farming and had widespread knowledge on the ethicality of plant-based milk products and brands. Whereas all other participants knowledge extended to the effects of methane; however, they don't research the environmental impacts of the products they purchase compared to P1 and P6, with P1 stating that they "like to research the brand before making a purchase, to ensure that they behave in a sustainable and ethical manner". These findings suggest that consumers who have prior knowledge of a situation do not act without considering the likely consequences of their decision, which is reflected in the Consumer Contextual Decision-Making Model (Suomala, 2020). Thus, indicating that Gen Z is making informed purchasing decisions that align with their beliefs.

All participants agreed and spoke positively about how eating and purchasing milk locally was an extremely beneficial way to behave sustainably. This was also explored in a literature review study; as Kamenidou et al. (2019) said, Gen Z usually eats locally rather than a plant-based diet to behave sustainably. Furthermore, both participants with an intolerance to dairy (P3 and P4) indicated that they would continue to drink

cow's milk if they weren't intolerant. P3 stated "I would like to be able to drink cow's milk and get it delivered by the local milkman if I weren't intolerant, as its local and sustainable". However, all participants live in the countryside; thus, they can consume milk from local farms, which many in the UK don't have access to.

5.2 Influences

There is much debate about who has the most significant influence on Gen Z's purchasing decisions. Despite the literatures claims that the growth in plant-based diets is due to social media influencers and bloggers (BritainThinks,2019), half of participants don't follow any influencers who promote sustainability on social media. However, the Gratification Theory (Croes and Bartels, 2021) suggests that young adults follow social influencers to seek information relevant to their lives, which illustrates why P1 and P6 follow social influencers who promote sustainability as the climate crisis is of importance to them.

The qualitative study suggests that the most significant influence on Gen Z is peer suggestions and family. All participants except P6 indicated that they were influenced to start drinking plant-based milk due to recommendations from friends or family. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour states that subjective norms relate to their perceived social influences of whether to indulge in a certain behaviour, indicating that participants drink plant-based-milk due to influences from friends and family. This was further explored in the literature as said from research by IRI (2021), which stated that recommendations from family and friends had the most significant influence on purchasing habits. Furthermore, all participants except P1 and P6 agreed that Gen Z portrays themselves as climate activists on social media yet don't behave sustainably.

Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory suggests people adopt the identity of the group they categorize themselves as belonging to. Supporting this theory, P3, P4 and P5 all noticed that on Instagram, one friend would repost about sustainability, then many would jump on the bandwagon, even though none of them behave sustainably away from social media. This is further supported in the literature, with research from BritainThinks suggesting that friends influence Gen Z as they fear 'being called out' for having the wrong opinions.

Despite the literature claiming that social media influencers inform and motivate consumers to change their dietary patterns to become more sustainable when participants were shown 'Feedmevegan.uk', each participant agreed that 'it was forcing veganism' on them. However, participants were shown 'Earthy Andy, which created completely different reactions. All participants agreed that her Instagram feed was far more likely to change their attitude towards consuming PBM and promoted a 'desirable lifestyle'. However, one participant stated that Instagram can cause some distrust, when shown Earthy Andy's Instagram, with P5 stating that it her lifestyle seemed "a little too perfect", which caused the participant some distrust. Repeated themes associated with 'Earthy Andy's' Instagram are illustrated below (figure 1). Thus, influencers who promote a happy and desirable lifestyle are most likely to influence Gen Z's purchasing decisions rather than Instagram influencers who show the reality of consuming a non-plant-based diet.



Figure 1: Repeated themes associated with Earthy Andy's Instagram feed

5.3 Price

During GenZ's formative years, several significant events occurred, but one of the momentous events was the Great Recession (Rue, 2018). Therefore, it is no surprise that all participants agreed that price was a barrier to consuming plant-based milk, which could also be due to them all being university students. However, all participants agreed that they were 'willing' to pay the premium price, whether for intolerance, environmental factors, animal cruelty, or preferred taste. This contradicts the findings from a study by Mintel (2021), which stated that 57% found higher prices unappealing when purchasing plant-based milk. However, this data could be different from the qualitative study because all participants have consumed PBM for at least 18 months; thus, they are set in their ways.

5.4 Availability

Convenience is one of the critical influences for consumers when making food choices (Aggarwal et al., 2016) and Gen Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk is no exception. All participants stressed that convenience was essential to them when purchasing plant-based milk. All participants stated that they struggled to find plant-

based milk at smaller supermarkets, such as Co-op. Furthermore, P1, who buys pea milk, said that she had to go to a health food shop to purchase pea-milk as there was no availability at any supermarket. Moreover, three participants stated that if they went to a café to get a coffee that didn't stock the PBM they drank, they would have milk instead. Thus, illustrating that convenience is extremely important to Gen Z consumers when purchasing plant-based milk.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the research conducted fully challenged the literature surrounding GenZ's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk. This research study for academia implies that generalised assumptions cannot be made on GenZ as a whole, as they are such a diverse group of individuals. Firstly, the study revealed that the climate crisis and animal cruelty were motivators behind some of Gen Z's switch to plant-based milk; however, health factors did not change respondents' views on plant-based milk. All respondents revealed that the climate crisis was concerning, and they would like to be more knowledgeable on their environmental impacts. Therefore, marketing practitioners should use this investigation to outline more effective campaigns on sustainability and provide more information on the effects of the climate crisis. Secondly, the study revealed that although social media influencers have increased participants awareness of sustainability, it has in no way changed GenZ's attitudes towards the consumption of plant-based milk. In contrast, peer suggestions were an evident influence in changing GenZ's attitudes towards plant-based milk. Thirdly, the study discredited that price is a hindering factor for Gen Z to consume plant-based milk, with all participants 'willing' to pay the premium price due to ethical factors, intolerances, or the taste. Finally, convenience was the most important factor for Gen Z when purchasing plant-based milk. The demographic used for the qualitative study were all university students; therefore, time pressures seriously affect their sustainable consumption. All participants stressed that the availability of plant-based milk was limited in several smaller supermarkets and cafés, to the extent that a few participants would drink cow's milk if the plant-based milk they drank were unavailable. Future research should explore Gen Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk using a larger, more diverse sample to increase validity and reliability.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Assignment brief

Assignment task

You are to conduct a **qualitative study** to address the following question:

Are consumers eating responsibly?

Your task:

For this assessment, you are required to add to existing research in attitudes of generation Z by exploring the specific topic of 'sustainable food/beverage consumption'. Your question, in summary, is to:

“Describe, explain and research the attitudes of Generation Z towards sustainable food/beverage consumption and explore these in a qualitative study in a country of your choice”.

There is plenty of research on attitudes towards sustainable consumption across various food and beverage categories. You are therefore required to narrow down by choosing any **ONE** food/beverage category and **ONE** country to focus on. Here are some examples of food and beverage categories you can choose (or you can choose your own):

- Sustainable meat-free products
- Lab-grown meat
- Dairy substitutes
- Packaged drinking water
- Vegan ice cream
- Palm oil
- Canned fish

Please note that once you select a food product segment you must **not** focus on any one branded product, but the **food/beverage category** (for example, on sustainable meat free substitutes rather than Quorn). If in doubt about your choice of sector and product segment, please speak with your seminar leader.

You are then required to carry out a qualitative study which includes only **ONE** of the following methodological approaches:

Data collection method	Number	Duration
Interviews	6-8 participants	Min. 30 minutes
Focus Groups	2-4 (Min. 3 participants in each)	Min. 45 minutes

Assignment length

The length of an assignment is limited to **3000** words to contribute towards the development of writing skills and to ensure all work is assessed equitably. We therefore require you to complete your assignments within the number of words specified in the assignment brief.

Appendix 2: Participant Profile

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Occupation	Home Location	Current Location
1	21	Female	UG Student	Dorset	Liverpool
2	21	Female	UG Student	Dorset	Cardiff
3	21	Male	Auctioneer	Dorset	Dorset
4	22	Female	UG Student	Hampshire	Oxford
5	21	Female	UG Student	Wiltshire	Oxford
6	21	Male	UG Student	Cambridgeshire	Oxford

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Research topic: To explore Generation Z's attitudes towards purchasing plant-based milk alternatives

Interview Questions:

Preliminary:

1. Are you aware of plant-based milk alternatives?
2. Have you purchased a plant-based milk alternative in the last 6 months?

Trends:

3. Which plant-based milk alternative do you drink?
4. What were your motivations for purchasing a plant based-milk alternative?
5. Has the climate crisis affected your attitudes at all when making the decision to purchase plant-based milk?
6. Do you believe the trend surrounding health has affected your attitudes towards drinking plant-based milk?

Attitude Behaviour Gap

7. Do you feel as though there is a pressure on our generation to behave sustainably and to be conscious with our consumption?
8. Do you believe that our generation may talk about being climate activists but then don't behave in environmentally friendly way?
9. Do you believe that climate change has affected the way that our generation portray themselves on social media?

Influences

10. Do you believe that peer suggestions may have influenced your decision to drink plant-based milk?
11. Do you believe the trend surrounding health has affected your attitudes towards drinking plant-based milk?
12. Do you think that it is fair that dairy milk is between 80-90p for 2 pints, which is the equivalent of a litre, and a carton of oat milk is £1.50 for a litre? Do you think that it is unfairly priced or that because of the use of plant-based ingredients that its ok?
13. Have you ever struggled to find plant-based milk at the supermarket?
14. How important is convenience to you?