

DO AGE COHORT AND PERSONAL INCOME MATTER IN GREEN MARKETING? THE CASE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Abstract:

Research background: As the public's attitude towards the climate crisis evolves, knowledge about the depth of this problem also evolves, and a great emphasis is placed on protecting the environment and moving from a consumerist lifestyle to a sustainable one whereby this knowledge is better in developed countries than in developing ones.

Purpose of the article: Because marketing operations increase consumption and waste while reducing product life cycles, companies have been partially blamed for environmental damage. The industrial and marketing sectors had to adapt their roles and strategies in response to this developing trend to recognize the value and need for green marketing.

Methods: The survey, which was focused on the perception of green marketing by Slovak consumers, was conducted from February 15th to February 23rd 2023, via Google forms. In our survey, 414 respondents take part. The statistical application IBM SPSS Statistics was then used to process the findings. The study questions were validated using descriptive statistics, the Chi-squared test of independence, and one sample test for a dichotomous outcome at the significance level of 5 %.

Findings & Value added: This study confirms that even in the specific conditions of Slovakia, age and income group represent factors that influence consumers when buying ecological products. On the other hand, if they encounter greenwashing, they are negatively influenced in their future purchasing decisions. The value-added lies in the fact that in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, this topic is still relatively new and is confronted with the country's specifics, so the study offers to various companies the results that green marketing activities should be focused on the different age cohorts with different strategies.

Keywords: green marketing; customer behaviour; age; personal income; greenwashing

JEL Classification: M31; M37; Q54

1. Introduction

The climate crisis is currently a much-discussed problem worldwide. Many scientists, politicians, and ordinary citizens point to the need to solve this problem at the national and transnational level and ask for global cooperation, as it is not an isolated problem that affects only some parts of the world (Mehraj and Qureshi, 2020). Although some still argue that we cannot talk about the climate crisis and question its seriousness, more and more evidence confirm an alarming situation that needs to be addressed for our and future generations. It is important to note that the results of climate crisis discussions are ongoing and evolving as the global response to the climate crisis continues to develop, and new challenges and opportunities emerge. The results of climate crisis discussions can vary depending on the specific forum, participants, and objectives. Some possible outcomes may include agreement on specific targets and commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, adoption of policies and regulations to support renewable energy deployment, energy efficiency, and sustainable practices, and commitments to provide financial support for climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, particularly in developing countries, enhanced cooperation and knowledge sharing between nations, organizations, and stakeholders, integration of climate change considerations into policy frameworks, development plans, and decision-making processes and last but not least calls for increased public awareness and engagement on climate change issues.

As the public's attitude towards the climate crisis evolves, knowledge about the depth of this problem also evolves, and a great emphasis is placed on protecting the environment and moving from a consumerist lifestyle to a sustainable one (El-Kassar and Singh, 2019). Ali (2021) stresses that this knowledge is better in developed countries than in developing ones. The business sphere also had to adapt to this trend, as sustainability has become a competitive advantage. Moreover, green marketing is just one of the options for a responsible approach to environmental protection (Nuryakin and Maryati, 2022).

Professional literature is becoming more and more interested in the topic of green marketing. However, in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, this topic is still relatively new and is confronted with the country's specifics (Nadanyiova et al., 2015). The lower purchasing power of the population, preferences, and access to environmental protection, while residents need to be sufficiently educated on the issue of environmental protection and underestimation of the importance of this topic are the main barriers to implementing green marketing in the Slovak Republic. Many organizations have started applying green marketing methods, but as Hanulakova (2021) states, it will take years till all businesses make green marketing part of their business process. Adopting and implementing green marketing requires the cooperation of businesses, consumers, and government. While businesses must embrace radical innovation and transformation in their operations, consumers must change their perceptions and become more adaptable to green products and services.

For this reason, the aim of the presented article is to find out whether factors such as age, income group or perceiving of greenwashing play an important role in the customers' intention to buy ecological products as the basis of green marketing activities. To the authors' best knowledge, previous studies conducted in the Slovak Republic were only aimed at one of these factors (the studies are mostly oriented only on age as a significant factor for perceiving green marketing activities).

The structure of the papers is as follows. The first chapter is aimed at building of theoretical background for stating the hypotheses. The next part explains the methodology used. The third chapter describes the results, followed by a discussion and confrontation of the study results. The last chapter summarizes the knowledge of the study.

1.1 Green marketing

Because marketing operations increase consumption and waste while reducing product life cycles, companies have been partially blamed for environmental damage. The industrial and marketing sectors had to adapt their roles and strategies in response to this developing trend to recognize the value and need for green marketing (Sharma, 2021). Green marketing, also known as sustainable marketing or eco-marketing, refers to promoting products or services with environmentally friendly attributes. However, as Skackauskiene and Vilkaite-Vaitone (2023) claim, green marketing cannot be limited only to green product advertising. It involves the use of marketing strategies and messaging to highlight a company's commitment to sustainability, environmental responsibility, and social impact.

The primary goal of green marketing is to appeal to consumers who are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of their purchasing decisions. It aims to position a brand as environmentally conscious and socially responsible, which can attract environmentally conscious consumers and differentiate the brand from competitors (Cheng et al., 2022).

The studies claim that key aspects of green marketing strategies include product development, green messaging and labelling, environmental certification, corporate social responsibility, consumer education and long-term sustainability focus (El-Kassar and Singh, 2019; Mehraj and Qureshi, 2020; Nuryakin and Maryati, 2022). The companies meeting consumer demands gain competitive advantage, reputation and brand image and meet regulatory compliance (Guerreiro et al., 2023). So, the companies acquire, via green innovation, a competitive advantage in green orientation and green performance. Martins (2022), in his study conducted in a SME environment, proved that aspects of green marketing such as environmental knowledge, environmental concerns, green price, green advertising and green products have a notably beneficial impact on perceived SME profitability.

1.2 Green marketing through the lens of consumers

"Green consumer behaviour" is the practice of acquiring and using environmentally friendly products and services while also exercising social responsibility. Yang and Chai (2022) claim that companies can support consumers to engage in green consumption through green marketing strategies. Examples of such strategies include CSR in environmental education, implementing substantive green marketing activities as much as possible, and optimizing offline sales scenarios. However, Sharma (2021) cautions that consumers' concern towards the environment does not always lead to actual purchases. Amoako et al. (2020) completed this statement by green knowledge and green attitudes of consumers as significant factors leading to purchasing behaviour.

Most studies focused on the perception of green marketing assets deal with all consumers in general or only with specific groups Z and Y, which are considered the most attractive for green activities of companies due to their growing interest in environmental problems (Munir and Mohan, 2022). According to Abrar et al. (2021), the main drivers of Y and Z generations for environmental purchase intentions are subjective norms, green self-concept and perceived behavioural control. Moisescu and Gica (2020) conducted a study on the sample of X and Y generations and conclude that also within these two age cohorts, are noticeable differences. Results showed that customers from Generation Y are much more impacted by corporate environmental responsibility than those from Generation X, whereas Generation X customers are more impacted by corporate social responsibility as a whole.

Generation Z is perceived as the most attractive segment for retailers, and it could be characterized by their inclination to sustainability and green intentions. They are aware of trends

in global phenomena and comprehend not only their extent but also how they will affect them in the future; therefore, they tend to participate in environmental preservation activities compared to their parents and grandparents. (Dabija et al., 2020). Papadopoulou et al. (2022) added that different variables influence each age group's environmental awareness, motivation, and responsiveness, which has ramifications for how well sustainability activities contribute to distinctiveness and competitiveness.

Based on this knowledge, the following hypothesis was stated:

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between the age of the respondents and their opinion on organic products.

Primary marketing literature highlights that one of the significant factors influencing the intention to purchase products is the product's price. Customers are willing to pay more only if they believe the product is worth more, for example, if it brings some environmental benefits. As it is known, green products have a higher price than traditional products, which can influence green consumer behaviour (Sedky and AbdelRaheem, 2022), mainly when we consider lower income groups (Jog and Singhal, 2020). This common knowledge is proved by Dangelico et al. (2020), whose study was made on the fashion industry, which faced many ecological failures. According to their results, age and household income level negatively affect the willingness to pay a premium price, which is in line with the study of Popa et al. (2019). According to Leal et al. (2021), consumers are disposed to pay higher prices if they are involved in developing a solution for the environmental problem and with assessments of third parties. These are the two main elements that can successfully persuade customers to pay a premium price. Chen and Yang (2019), following their study, also claim that an audit of green marketing activities supports the trust of consumers and competitive advantage. It needs to be pointed out that the loyalty of green customers is built on their similar values with the company, not on the price of the product (Boccia et al., 2019) which can be considered as win-win situation.

This knowledge leads us to the statement:

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the respondents' income and the amount of surcharge for ecological products.

The companies utilise green marketing techniques to establish a competitive advantage and win over environmentally conscientious customers. But not all green marketing promises represent businesses' environmental behaviour accurately, and some of them may even be considered as "greenwashing". This can lead not only to profit loss but also to loss of customers' trust (Szabo and Webster, 2021). It can even influence the customers' preferences for sustainable products over non-sustainable (Nygaard and Silkoset, 2022). On the other hand, Testa and Boiral (2018) claim that customers are often the purpose why companies greenwash. Aragon et al. (2022) claim that in more economically developed countries, the attitude of consumers towards greenwashing is much stricter than in less economically developed countries. The authors concluded that in developed countries, the disclosure of greenwashing leads to a loss of trust towards the company and its substitution by competitors. This is in line with Job and Singhal (2020) statement that the higher level of greenwashing understanding, the lower purchasing intention of the customers.

H3: More than 2/3 of the respondents who were victims of greenwashing were discouraged by this fact from making another purchase.

2. Methodology

The survey, which was focused on the perception of green marketing by Slovak consumers, was conducted from February 15th to February 23rd 2023, via Google forms. The minimum

sample size was calculated at the population of 4 392 803 habitants of the Slovak Republic over 18 years old with a 5 % margin of error and 95 % confidence level. The required minimal sample was stated as 384 respondents. In our survey, 414 respondents take part, 58,2 % female and 41,8 % male. According to age, the distribution of the sample was as follows: Generation Z (18 - 27 years old) – 52.4 % of respondents; Generation Y (28 – 43) – 26.6 % of respondents; Generation X (44 – 58) – 14.3 %; generation of Baby Boomers (59 – 77) – 6.7 %. According to the monthly household income per person, the respondents were grouped as follows: 1 000 € and more – 33.1 % of respondents; from 800 to 1000 € - 30.4 %; from 600 to 800 € - 24.9 %; less than 600 € - 11.6 %.

The statistical application IBM SPSS Statistics was then used to process the findings. The study questions were validated using descriptive statistics, the Chi-squared test of independence, and one sample test for a dichotomous outcome at the significance level of 5%.

3. Results

At first, we study how the respondents perceive green marketing. According to our results, 46.5 % of respondents perceive green marketing as “a modern means of promoting current environmental trends in a wide range of business activities”. 29.5 % of respondents think it is only “promoting or advertising of environmental products and services”. 12.6 % of respondents claim that green marketing is “business activities aimed at achieving a competitive advantage”, and only 11.4 % of participants perceived that green marketing represents “marketing activities aimed at improving the image of the company.”

H1 and H2 were tested by Pearson’s chi-squared test. At first, two hypotheses for each H1 and H2 were stated. The null hypothesis was stated as “there are no differences between searched variables”, and the alternative hypothesis was “there are differences between searched variables”. Then the observed and expected values were computed.

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between the age of the respondents and their opinion on ecological products.

Table 1: Observed and expected values for the H1.

		What is your opinion about ecological products?				Total	
		Other	It is only a marketing strategy	I do not perceive any differences	I perceive it in a positive way		
Age group	Z	Count	6	23	34	154	217
		Expected Count	5.8	32.5	45.6	133.1	217.0
	Y	Count	3	21	31	55	110
		Expected Count	2.9	16.5	23.1	67.5	110.0
	X	Count	1	11	14	33	59
		Expected Count	1.6	8.8	12.4	36.2	59.0
	BB	Count	1	7	8	12	28
		Expected Count	0.7	4.2	4.9	17.2	28.0
	Total	Count	11	62	87	254	414
		Expected Count	11.0	62.0	87.0	24.0	414.0

Note: BB – Baby Boomers

Source: Own processing

The assumptions for performing the dependency test have been met. The significance (p-value) in the Chi-Squared test was at the level of 0.014, which is less than alpha 0.05 ($0.014 < 0.05$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis, which says that there is a relationship between the age of the respondents and their opinion on ecological products, but according to Cramer V (0.129), the dependency is weak.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the respondents' income and the amount of surcharge for ecological products.

Table 2: Observed and expected values for the H2.

			How much % are you willing to pay extra for ecological products?					
			0 %	5 %	10 %	20 %	30 %	Total
Income	up to 600	Count	15	15	16	1	1	48
		Expected Count	8.1	18.9	13.6	5.3	2.1	48.0
(€)	600 - 800	Count	26	43	23	8	3	103
		Expected Count	17.4	40.6	29.1	11.4	4.5	103.0
	800 - 1000	Count	14	46	42	15	9	126
		Expected Count	21.3	49.6	35.6	14.0	5.5	126.0
	more than 1000	Count	15	59	36	22	5	137
		Expected Count	23.2	53.9	38.7	15.2	6.0	137.0
Total		Count	70	163	117	46	18	414
		Expected Count	70.0	163.0	117.0	46.0	18.0	414.0

Source: Own processing

The assumptions for performing the test have been met. The p-value in the Chi-Squared test is 0.002, which is less than the significance level of 0.05 ($0.002 < 0.05$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis, which says that there is a statistical dependence between the respondents' income per household person and the amount of surcharge for ecological products, but according to Cramer V (0.159), is weak.

H3: More than 2/3 of the respondents who were victims of greenwashing were discouraged by this fact from making another purchase.

H3 was tested by one sample test for a dichotomous outcome. Hypothesis no. 3 is, from the point of view of mathematical statistics, an assumption about the share of π_0 ($2/3$) consumers who were discouraged from further purchase (answered yes, $m = 61$) from consumers who became victims of greenwashing ($n = 113$). The value of p_0 were calculated as:

$$p_0 = \frac{m}{n} = \frac{61}{113} \doteq 0,54 \quad (1)$$

The validity of test is proved by:

$$\begin{aligned} n \cdot \pi_0 \cdot (1 - \pi_0) &> 5 \\ 113 \cdot 2/3 \cdot (1 - 2/3) &> 5 \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

So, the statistic for testing is:

$$U = \frac{p_0 - \pi_0}{\sqrt{\frac{\pi_0 \cdot (1 - \pi_0)}{n}}} = \frac{0,54 - 2/3}{\sqrt{\frac{2/3 \cdot (1 - 2/3)}{113}}} \doteq -2,94 \quad (3)$$

The critical value for $U_{2\alpha}$ is 1,28, that means that test statistic $|U|$ is over critical value ($2,94 > 1,28$) and null hypothesis is accepted. It means that 2/3 of the respondents who were victims of greenwashing were discouraged by this fact from making another purchase.

4. Discussion

The purpose of developing green marketing is to foster sustainable business practices, meet consumer expectations, gain a competitive advantage, enhance brand reputation, and contribute to protecting and preserving the environment (El-Kassar and Singh, 2019). According to our study, green marketing is mainly seen as a tool for promoting environmental trends. However, many respondents still perceive it as advertising of ecological products or a tool of competitiveness which can support the company's brand image. It could be caused by the fact that in the Slovak Republic, it is quite a new concept, and many of the companies use it mainly for promoting their products, and they do not use it from a strategic point of view.

Most young people are raised in a harmful environment and are conscious of this threat. Dabija et al. (2020) claim that Generation Z tries to take simple steps to protect the environment and consider ecological factors in their purchase decision-making. This is in accordance with our results which claim that various generations perceive ecological products differently. Also, Papadopoulou et al. (2022) highlight that companies should focus their marketing activities on younger generations as they are target consumers. However, we consider older generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers) the relevant target market as well, but they need to be more educated in the environment issues. They need to understand the associated risks and develop their trust towards these green strategies. All these factors, that need to be strengthened, are identified as primary barriers to green purchase behaviour, according to Sharma (2021). Also, Leal et al. (2021) pointed to consumers' scepticism toward ecological products.

Another significant factor influencing the customers' intention to buy green products are living standards or the budget planning period (Karginova-Gubinova et al. 2021). Due to the lower purchasing power of the population, it is difficult for green products and services to achieve broader interest and success in the market. Consumers often prefer cheaper alternatives, even if these may not be environmentally sustainable. It is also proved by our results which claim that the higher income of the household, the higher willingness to pay extra money for green products. Therefore, companies in the field of green marketing must find ways to reach and convince customers about the value and benefits of ecologically oriented products.

As consumers show increasing demand for ecological and sustainable products, companies need to adjust to this trend. On the other hand, according to Munir and Mohan (2022), it caused companies also apply some greenwashing practices, which significantly negatively affect the future willingness of the customers to buy green products. This aligns with our results when 2/3 of greenwashing victims refuse to buy green products.

5. Conclusions

Although green marketing is a relatively new concept in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, many companies have already started to orient themselves towards it. They understood that if they wanted to gain and especially maintain a good position in the market, they needed to do more than provide a product or service in the right place and at the right price through appropriate communication. Many people, especially young people, are aware of the necessity to protect the environment, and they also ask companies to not only behave ecologically but also to produce such products.

On the other hand, there are still significant differences in green shopping behaviour concerning age or income group. Not to mention that if consumers experience greenwashing, it can permanently discourage them from buying green products.

This study confirms that even in the specific conditions of Slovakia, age and income group represent factors that influence consumers when buying ecological products. On the other hand, if they encounter greenwashing, they are negatively influenced in their future purchasing decisions.

The limits of this study lie in the examined sample, the majority of which is represented by younger age groups. In the future, it would be more appropriate to focus on a more representative sample from the generation point of view. The further direction of our research will also be aimed at a better understanding of the issue in the context of the Slovak Republic in order to find out what factors most influence consumers in favour of green products.

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