

Social Influences and Social Media Engagement Effects on Eco-Friendly Behaviors in Gen Y & Z: Moderating Effects of Personality

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Introduction. Recent research shows that Millennials and Generation Z consumers are most likely to make purchase decisions based on personal, social and environmental principles and values (Petro, 2021). Further, Gen Z consumers are beginning to demand sustainable retail options. Members of this generation report preferring sustainable brands and being willing to spend up to 10% more on sustainable products (Petro, 2021).

Literature Review. A majority of consumers say that they want to purchase from brands with a sustainability focus but only slightly over a quarter of them actually do (White et al., 2019). The concept of generations means that the cultural climate individuals live their formative years in influences their values, feelings and actions (Gazzola et al., 2020). According to Pew Research, Gen Y consumers were born between 1981 and 1996 and Gen Z consumers were born in 1997 and after (Dimock, 2019). Gen Y is now the largest group of working adults in the US and holds tremendous power over spending habits (Bonera et al., 2020). Unique to Gen Z is that they are the only generation to never know life without the internet (Viens, 2019). Both generations report high daily social media usage, with Gen Z reporting slightly more time engaging with social media than Gen Y (Viens, 2019). Further, almost half of Gen Y report engagement with social media prompted them to overspend to impress those in their networks, suggesting a degree of social signaling taking place online (Viens, 2019). For this study, we identified two social influences as factors for eco-friendly behaviors: normative and informative susceptibilities. Normative susceptibility indicates individuals' decision making process to comply with others' expectations, while informative susceptibility is searching for information from knowledgeable others by observing them (Miller, 1998).

Personality involves the unique characteristics that form an individual's thinking and behaviour (Holzman, n.d.). The Big Five model separates personality traits into 5 domains: agreeableness, openness, extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness (Yu, Lee & Chao, 2020). When looking at only Gen Z members, male and female, openness to experience and neuroticism moderated respondents attitude toward social media and subsequent immersion (Yu, Lee & Chao, 2020). Further, personality traits can influence eco-friendly behaviors. In a study examining eco-friendly tourist behaviors in Cyprus, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion and neuroticism were found to be positively associated with environmentalism (Kvasova, 2015).

Theoretical Framework. People desire to be perceived positively, by themselves and by others (Grossman, 2015). Some personality traits and characteristics are generally viewed positively but are difficult to observe (Grossman, 2015). Knowing this, people may alter their actions in order to send a more positive image about themselves (Grossman, 2015). This "social signaling" enables effective communication and can include signals like speech, body movements,

manipulation of objects and combinations of these (Loth & Ruiter, 2016). Technological advances and the widespread adoption of social media leaves more opportunities for social signaling in the digital space. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Social media engagement mediates the effect of social influences (normative and informative) on eco-friendly behaviors.

H2: Big 5 personalities (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness to experience) moderate the relationship between social media engagement and eco-friendly behaviors.

H3: Big 5 personalities (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness to experience) moderate the relationship between social influences (normative and informative) and eco-friendly behaviors.

Method. An online survey was developed and distributed via Qualtrics. Individuals, who live in the United States, are female, and are aged between 18 and 39 in the year 2020, were eligible to participate in this survey. Participants were asked to answer questions about social influences (normative and informative susceptibilities; Bearden et al., 1989), social media engagement (Alt, 2015), eco-friendly behaviors (Abdul-Muhmin, 2007) and the Big 5 inventory (John et al., 1991) on 7-point Likert scale.

Results. A total of 245 complete responses were collected. PROCESS analyses were conducted to test hypotheses. Normative ($t = 2.08, p \leq .05$) and informative ($t = 5.44, p \leq .001$) susceptibilities increased social media engagement. Social media engagement has a positive influence on eco-friendly behaviors ($t = 6.16, p \leq .001$). Also, social media engagement is a significant mediator on the effects of normative ($.06 < CI < .15$) and informative ($.06 < CI < .16$) susceptibilities on eco-friendly behaviors, supporting H1. Among the Big 5 personality traits, only extraversion and conscientiousness were significant moderators. Specifically, the extraversion moderated the relationship between social media engagement and eco-friendly behavior ($t = 2.88, p \leq .01$), while conscientiousness moderated the effect of informative susceptibility on eco-friendly behavior ($t = -1.98, p \leq .05$). Thus, the results partially support H2 and H3.

Conclusion. Younger generations are more interested in buying sustainable products. Given this, it is critical to understand the factors that increase eco-friendly behavior for these consumers. Social media engagement and individual personality traits were found in this study to exert mediating and moderating influence on social influences and eco-friendly behavior to varying degrees. Companies wanting to target consumers based on environmental initiatives will want to have and maintain an active presence and publicity for these initiatives on social media.

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