

## Have Slovak Gen Z Consumers Become More Socially Responsible during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Lucia Bartková<sup>1</sup>, Lucia Hudáková<sup>2</sup> and Lenka Veselovská<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1,2,3\*</sup>*Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia*  
<sup>1</sup>*lucia.bartkova@umb.sk*, <sup>2</sup>*lucia.hudakova@umb.sk*, <sup>3\*</sup>*lenka.veselovska@umb.sk*

### **Abstract**

*Socially responsible consumption was a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic, both from an economic point of view, when residents were forced to manage their lives under new conditions due to uncertain employment and income, and also from the point of view of slowing down the spread of the disease in society. The research aimed to examine changes in the consumer behavior of the Slovak Generation Z towards socially responsible consumption. This topic was investigated through a questionnaire survey of a sample of consumers born between 1995 and 2002. As the results of the research show, Slovak consumers of Generation Z behaved responsibly during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of them bought less often and also smaller quantities of products. The Slovak Generation Z, the generation that is closest to socially responsible consumption, demonstrated responsible behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, which represents a good basis for further strengthening socially responsible behavior in broader environmental and social contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Socially responsible consumer behavior of Generation Z, Consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic*

### **1. Introduction**

Covid-19 is a disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2), which first appeared in December 2019 in China [1][2]. The virus spreads between people primarily through droplet infection when coughing, sneezing, or talking [3]. In February 2020, the disease COVID-19 spread rapidly throughout the world [4]. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the disease COVID-19 a global pandemic [5]. During the following months of 2020, there were millions of cases of the disease COVID-19 worldwide and more than a million deaths caused by the disease COVID-19 worldwide.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Red Cross have issued several hygiene measures to reduce the rate of spread of the virus between persons at the individual level, which normally slows the spread of other viral diseases [6]. Other measures related to keeping a distance between people, avoiding the use of public transport, and shopping during the busiest hours of the day [7].

In addition to these measures at the level of individuals, other measures were taken at the level of companies and countries aimed mainly at reducing the mobility of residents. Countries introduced lockdowns during periods with the worst infectivity of the virus, which

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meant closing businesses and institutions or limiting their activities and opening hours. As far as possible, employees worked from home, public events were canceled, and mandatory curfews were introduced several times [8][9][10]. Social media have become the main information channel for spreading information about the COVID-19 pandemic [11].

The researcher can assume that the current climate changes and their future development will have an impact on the spread of viruses, population growth, and animal domestication has a great impact on the transfer of pathogens from animals to humans [12]. Considering the predictions for the future, the researcher expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will recur, or that a new virus will emerge that will cause a similar situation to the disease COVID-19 [13]. That is why the researcher was interested in the consumption behavior of Generation Z, which currently makes up approximately one-third of the world's population [14]. Generation Z is defined from a sociological and demographic point of view as a group of young people born between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s [15]. This heterogeneous and multicultural group is made up of individuals who are socially active and interested in education and culture [16][17]. Generation Z is predicted to become the largest generation in the coming years [18][19]. But Generation Z already represents one of the most interesting consumer segments [20]. The COVID-19 pandemic is considered a defining event that will provide information on how the future will develop, which will be formed by members of Generation Z [21]. Therefore, this research was focused precisely on exploring the changing habits and opinions of this market segment that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Literature review

Generation Z (Gen Z) is made up of people born between 1995 and 2010, some authors limit this generation to the years of birth from 199 to 2012 [22][23][24][25].

The year 1995 was chosen as the cutoff year for Gen Z for two reasons [26]. The first reason is the 9/11 event. Life under constant threat from external geopolitical events and during the economic recession and financial crisis is thus one of the main determining factors influencing the behavior of Gen Z. The second reason is the fact that since 1995, many market research reports began to be published, which made it possible to know the consumer behavior of the Generation Z.

Generation Z is made up of teenagers and young adults who are characterized by being individualistically ambitious, globally oriented, technologically savvy, and with a high level of language skills. Generation Z members are considered open-minded, tend towards a culture of immediate solutions, and are less sensitive to privacy concerns [27][28]. Information and communication technologies are an integral part of their lives and influence their outlook on learning, work, and consumption [29][30][31]. They are used to using them from an early age, which shapes their personality. Generation Z is already growing up with the knowledge and experience to use digital technologies [16][32]. These young people have essentially not experienced a world without digital technologies [14][33]. A distinctive characteristic of members of Generation Z is the ability to multitask: performing several activities at the same time, such as using social media on the phone, browsing the Internet on the computer, and listening to music. According to research, they can watch up to five screens at one time [34]. Most of their activities are connected to the virtual world. Generation Z is the first truly global cohort. For most of them, information technology is an integral part of their lives, as they were born at a time when the Internet and access to information became a global culture. This affected their values, expectations, and life goals [35].

Growing up in the post 9/11 world and during the recession caused Generation Z members to be more oriented towards social issues and responsible consumption values than older cohorts [36][37]. They are skilled in the use of the Internet and smartphones, but they use social networks not only for communication but also for self-expression, work, learning, and education in the financial field [38]. Generation Z members understand financial issues from a young age [39]. Generation Z is a consumer-driven generation [40]. Gen Z consumers adapt their consumption to their values and can make rapid changes in their consumer behavior [19]. Therefore, we were interested in whether they were able to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic situation so that we could predict their consumer behavior in the event of any event, not just a pandemic, in the future.

Generation Z is considered the most eco-friendly and eco-conscious cohort of all consumers [41][42]. Moreover, the number of members of Generation Z aware of environmental and climate changes is growing [43].

Generation Z primarily consumes products in industries of food, fashion, entertainment, and technology [18]. The volume of purchase and consumption of these products was significantly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Food as a commodity of daily consumption continued to be purchased, but the purchases took place in limited time and space conditions, and part of the purchases moved to the online space. Purchases of fashion products decreased, as due to the lockdown, reduced mobility, and limited social contacts, people did not need to buy new clothes. The consumption of entertainment products was stopped completely. On the other hand, there was a great need for ICT, to maintain social contacts, but also to ensure the teaching and working process from home (computer, camera, microphone, software, office equipment (printer) and supplies).

During lockdowns, people needed less, shopped less, and spent less mainly speaking about Generation Z [44]. Moreover, generation Z consumers incorporate a consumption approach that combines pleasure and responsibility in general [45]. This research aims to discover whether these findings can also be applied to Generation Z by mapping in detail their consumer behavior changes.

### **3. Methodology**

Generation Z is prospectively the most important group of consumers for the future. Knowing the consumer behavior of its members will be important not only for the economy but also for managing crises and unpredictable situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To behave socially responsibly was necessary not only from an economic point of view when residents were forced to manage their lives under new conditions due to uncertain employment and income, but also from the point of view of slowing down the spread of the disease in society. In addition, socially responsible consumption contributes to sustainable development, which represents a great challenge for the future. Therefore, the research also explored the extent to which the members of Gen Z become socially responsible during their consumption.

The article aimed to examine changes in the consumer behavior of the Slovak Generation Z towards socially responsible consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigation focused on changes in the consumer behavior of Generation Z in Slovakia using the questionnaire technique. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions aimed at consumer behavior and 5 demographic questions. Exactly 347 respondents filled out the questionnaire. The questionnaire for data collection was disseminated in 2021. To investigate the consumer behavior of Generation Z, this research specifically focused on the information provided by

those consumers who indicated the year of birth between 1995 and 2002. To verify the representativeness of the sample file, a nonparametric chi-square test was used according to the age of Generation Z.

Table 1. Chi-square test

			Age
Chi-Square			5,973
df			7
Asymp. Sig.			<b>,543</b>
Monte Carlo Sig.	Sig.		,544
	99% Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	,531
		Upper Bound	,557

The null hypothesis claimed that the sample file is representative ( $F(x) = G(x)$ ) and the alternative hypothesis claimed that the sample file is not representative ( $F(x) \neq G(x)$ ). The chi-square test was realized in SPSS Statistics at a 0.05 level of significance. If the identified p-value is lower than the significance level, the null hypothesis is denied and the sample file is not representative, and vice versa. Table 1 shows that the p-value is 0.543, which is more than the significance level ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) and the sample file is representative.

This research examined the assumption that the Slovak Generation Z during the COVID-19 pandemic adapted their consumer behavior in terms of less intensity of shopping and consumption of goods and shifted to sustainable consumption. That is why a set of research questions was developed as follows:

RQ1: We assume that the majority of the Slovak Generation Z behaved responsibly during the COVID-19 pandemic and shopped the same or less amount of products as before the pandemic.

RQ2: We assume that the majority of Slovak Generation Z behaved responsibly during the COVID-19 pandemic and visited shops to a lesser extent than before the pandemic

Generation Z is generally considered to be a cohort heavily influenced by information spread through the media and the Internet [46]. Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, social media was the main information channel for Generation Z [47]. We were interested in what was the main factor influencing consumer behavior for the Slovak Generation Z. In connection with the investigation of the effects of selected factors on the change in the consumer behavior of Generation Z in Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic, we set the third research question:

RQ3: Which factor most influenced the decision-making of Generation Z in Slovakia?

Given the situation and measures during the pandemic in Slovakia, we chose the following as the main factors: information in the media, information through official state channels (Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, Office of Hygiene, etc.), the influence of friends, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances, previous experience, the feeling of security in the store, store location, store availability, advertising, and brand loyalty.

#### 4. Results and discussion

Socially responsible behavior and consumption are based on increased awareness of the impact of one's own consumer decisions on the environment, society, health, etc. [48][49]. Manifestations of consumer behavior oriented towards society and the environment are also called socially responsible consumption. It is a type of consumption that considers the public consequences of private consumption as a way to minimize damage and maximize long-term

benefits to society [50]. Generation Z is considered to be the most socially responsible [45], so in our research we were interested in whether Slovak consumers from Generation Z also behaved socially responsible during the COVID-19 pandemic in the sense of a smaller amount and frequency of shopping. In connection with this, we formulated two hypotheses.

The first RQ we set was focused on the amount of purchased goods. Considering the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a lockdown was introduced several times, which was related to the closing of shops, restriction of social contacts, or curfew, we assumed that consumers did not need as many products as they did before the pandemic and therefore we assumed that the majority and Gen Z behaved responsibly and bought less or the same amount of products as before the pandemic.

To confirm or deny the RQ 1, the answers of respondents were divided into 2 categories. Category 1 consisted of answers "I bought less or the same" and category 2 were answers "I bought more". Consequently, the non-parametric, binomial test was used. The test was performed in SPSS Statistics with a significance level of 0.05. As [Table 2] shows, 83% of respondents bought less or the same during the COVID-19 pandemic and only 17% bought more.

Table 2. Binominal test of RQ 1

Binomial Test						
	Category	Observed Prop.	Test Prop.	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Bought less or the same	1.00	,83	,50	,000	,000 <sup>a</sup>
	Bought more	2.00	,17			
	Total		1.00			

The null hypothesis in this test was set as  $H_0: \pi = 0.5$  and consequently the alternative hypothesis was  $H_A: \pi > 0.5$ . The p-value is on level 0.000 which is less than the determined significance level (0.05). It means that the set null hypothesis can be denied and hypothesis 1 can be confirmed. It is true that the Slovak Generation Z behaved responsibly during the COVID-19 pandemic and shopped for the same or less amount of products as before the pandemic.

At the same time, as part of RQ 2, we assumed that the majority of Slovak consumers from Generation Z bought products less often during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

Another binomial test was used to identify if RQ 2 can be confirmed or not. The answers to the questionnaire were divided into two categories. Category 1 consists of answers that claimed that the respondent visited stores less than before the pandemic. Category 2 represents all other answers (more frequent visits or the same number of visits). Table 3 shows that 71% of respondents visited stores less and 29% more or the same as before the pandemic.

Table 3. Binominal test of RQ 2

Binomial Test						
	Category	Observed Prop.	Test Prop.	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Group 1	1.00	,71	,50	,001	,001 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	,00	,29			
	Total		1.00			

[Table 3] also shows that the p-value (according to this test it is necessary to split it in half) is 0.0005 (less than the level of significance). It means that also RQ 2 can be confirmed and it is true that the Slovak Generation Z behaved responsibly during the COVID-19 pandemic and they visited stores less than before the pandemic.

Consequently, as part of RQ 3, this research focused on exploring factors influencing the consumer behavior of the Slovak Generation Z during the COVID-19 pandemic. To analyze those frequency tables of all factors were created. It was identified that the biggest impact on the decision-making of buying products and services was Professional information (Ministry of Health, Office of Hygiene, and others – e.g. on their websites), Previous experiences, and Availability of the store. However, it can be concluded that the media, as the main source of information for Generation Z, did not have a significant impact on the consumer behavior of this group of consumers this time. [Figure 1] shows the corresponding data for Generation Z in comparison to other age segments.

The data shows that Generation Z was the age group that most trusted the professional information provided by the government and incorporated it into their shopping decisions. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in the influence of the location of the store and the feeling of safety in the store observed among different generations. The age group 50 to 59 years old was the only consumer segment with a higher ratio of influence by the availability of stores than Generation Z.

Generation Z is made up of members who gradually engage in productive life and gradually become consumers, while their consumer behavior can be modified over time. Research on the consumption behavior of this cohort is therefore limiting and research results may be out of date over time. It is therefore important to regularly repeat the study of the consumer behavior of Generation Z, update the results, and then formulate suitable recommendations for practice.

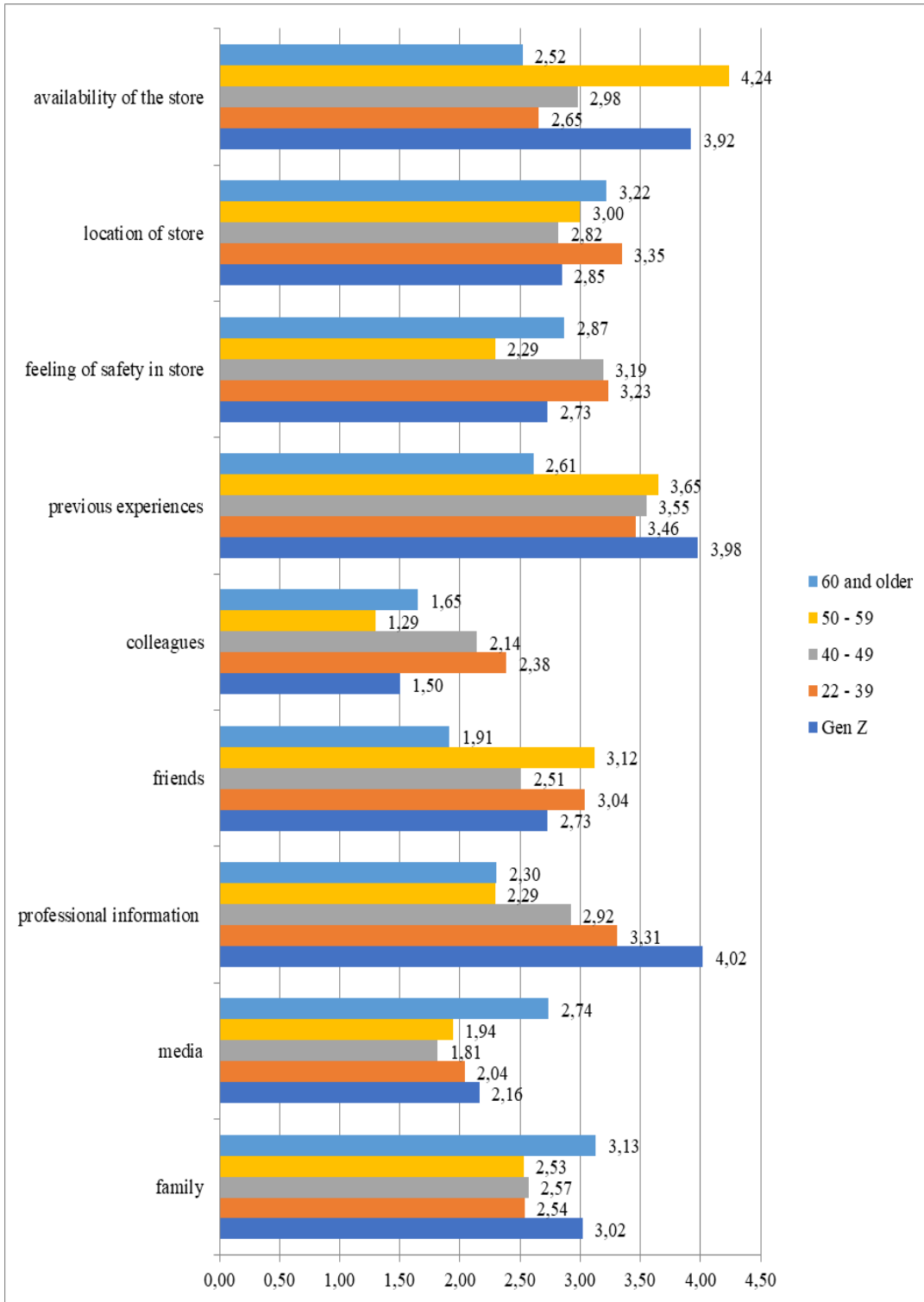


Figure 1. Factors influencing consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic according to age of consumers

## 5. Conclusion

The research aimed to examine changes in the consumer behavior of the Slovak Generation Z towards socially responsible consumption. According to the results, Slovak Generation Z behaved responsibly during the COVID-19 pandemic went to shops less often, and bought fewer products. This is a positive finding since responsible behavior during a pandemic is the basis for managing it and limiting the spread of the disease. Moreover, responsible consumption in the sense of less shopping intensity is also positive in broader contexts [51].

According to other research sources, the situation during a pandemic may lead to greater social responsibility for consumers [45]. According to a recent study, Gen Z Shoppers Demand Sustainable Retail, the majority of Generation Z consumers prefer to consume sustainably. In another survey, 75% of Generation Z respondents wanted to see that brands were ensuring consumer safety [44]. Even in comparison with other generations, specifically with the currently largest generation of Millennials, Generation Z is more oriented towards responsible consumption [34], which is also confirmed by the results of this primary research.

As per [52], societal formations are giving rise to consumer segments inclined towards conscientious consumption. These individuals aspire to lead simpler lives, purchase fewer goods, and support local businesses with responsible practices. Additionally, they express a readiness to cultivate or manufacture their items, engage in reuse, and participate in item exchanges. Various approaches to implementing responsible consumption in real-life situations are outlined by Vesterinen and Syrjala [53], such as abstaining (reducing frequency or volume of purchases), categorization and maintenance (organizing and evaluating acquired items, as well as repairing, modifying, or redesigning them), DIY tendencies (creating or cultivating personal products), and swapping or renting (clothing, literature, automobiles, etc.).

All of these behaviors empower individuals to embrace a more deliberate, uncomplicated, and wholesome lifestyle. Adopting a diet of straightforward (unprocessed) foods sourced locally and engaging in more physical activities (walking or biking instead of driving) is regarded as the foundation of a healthy way of life [54][55][56][57]. Furthermore, Generation Z consumers adhere to healthy eating practices, and their choices are intertwined with responsible conduct [58][59].

The inclination towards a healthy lifestyle is progressively favored not only globally but also in Slovakia [60][61][62][63]. Hence, integrating sustainable strategies into daily routines as an integral part of a healthy lifestyle is anticipated to enhance responsible consumption in the Slovak Republic.

In this case, informing the company is very important. Generation Z generally prefers information through media, especially social media. In the event of the COVID-19 pandemic its consumer behavior was primarily influenced by official information distributed through official state channels. It is possible to prioritize these information channels when communicating and promoting a healthy lifestyle not only towards Generation Z but towards the whole society.

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## Authors



### **Lucia Bartková**

She is a Ph.D. teacher at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. She devotes herself to the issues of Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Customer Relationship Management, and Quality Management. She has participated in projects granted by public and private institutions. She published tens of expert and scientific articles in Slovakia and abroad, she is the author or coauthor of several textbooks.



### **Lucia Hudáková**

She is a Ph.D. Teacher at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. She devotes herself to the issues of Corporate Social Responsibility, Statistics, Management of Innovations, Environmental Management, and Occupational safety and health management. She has participated in various public and private projects and published various articles and textbooks in Slovakia and abroad.



### **Lenka Veselovská**

She is an Associate Professor at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, and the Head of the Department of the Institute of managerial systems. Her research focuses on risk management and supply chain management. She has participated in various projects granted by public and private institutions. She published tens of expert and scientific articles in Slovakia and abroad, she is the co-author of several textbooks. She actively participates in scientific events and cooperates with foreign universities. In business practice, she had a part in the implementation of anti-bribery management systems in public and private organizations.

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