

Gen Z's Expectations of Brand Responsibility: Navigating Social Justice, Mental Health, and Sustainability

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Abstract: Generation Z (Gen Z) is a socially conscious and digitally savvy consumer segment that is becoming more and more focused on the brand's commitment to social justice, mental health support, and sustainability. However, despite increased corporate interest in socially responsible practices, little research exists explaining how the three of these dimensions affect Gen Z's understanding of brand authenticity and trust in a unified way. This study addresses this gap by discussing about the responsible brand actions and how responsible actions affect the authenticity and authenticity leads to the prediction of trust among Gen Z consumers in Bengaluru. A quantitative and cross-sectional research design was adopted, a structured questionnaire was used with the sample size of 300 Gen Z respondents being between the ages of 18-28 years. Multi-item Likert scales were created and used to measure Social Justice Engagement, Mental Health Support, Sustainability Practices, Perceived Brand Authenticity and Brand Trust. Data was analysed by the structural equation modelling (SmartPLS 4) on reliability, validity, direct effects, and mediation relationships. Findings indicate that all three dimensions of brand responsibility have a significant, positive effect on perceived brand authenticity with sustainability practices being the most effective. Perceived brand authenticity became a very powerful predictor of brand trust. Mediation analysis confirmed some partial mediating effect of authenticity between the dimensions of responsibility and trust, pointing to the suggestion that the reason why Gen Z trusts brands is not only because of the responsible action, but because of the authenticity of the action and its communication. The findings underscore the importance of authenticity as a key mechanism by which brands are connected to trust formation among Gen Z. Brands seeking to build strong and valuable relationships with young consumers must show consistent, transparent and long-term commitments to social and environmental issues. The research provides some practical information to marketers who are trying to create meaningful, honest branding strategies which will fit in with Gen Z's ethical expectations.

Keywords: Generation Z Brand Responsibility Social Justice Engagement, Mental Health Support Sustainability Practices Perceived Brand Authenticity, Trust in Brand Ethical Branding

1. Introduction

The changing landscape of consumer-brand relationships has changed dramatically over the course of the last decade - fuelled by greater social awareness, digital interconnectivity and high expectations around corporate responsibility. Among all present-day consumer groups, Generation Z (Gen Z) - individuals born between 1997 and 2012 - has emerged as a particularly influential group redefining what it means for brands to act responsibly and authentically (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Unlike the generations that came before, which were significantly shaped by price, quality and ease of acquiring products, Gen Z places significant emphasis on whether or not a brand is morally, ethically and socially aligned (Williams et al., 2022). They expect brands to have clear consistent and genuine stances on pressing societal concerns such as social justice, mental health and environmental sustainability so these areas have become a core focus of modern branding practices.



Gen Z's expectations are moulded by their one-of-a-kind socio-technological environment. Being digital natives, they have lived with constant exposure to world events, culture shifts and online activism. This exposure makes them better able to find quickly inconsistencies between a brand's expressed values and actual practices (Priporas et al., 2017). As a result, Gen Z is especially critical of performative activism, tokenistic inclusion and greenwashing, which undermine perceived brand authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Authenticity, measured as how much the brand is perceived as real, honest and value-congruent, has become one of the ultimate factors to be considered when it comes to trust, credibility and long-term brand loyalty (Napoli et al., 2014).

1.1 Problem Statement

Although several brands now use social justice messaging, mental health campaigns and sustainability efforts in ever growing marketing efforts, there is still a lack of understanding as to how Gen Z interprets these and whether they are able to translate them to meanings of genuine or trustworthiness. Current research tends to be split between the different domains of responsibility to environment such as sustainability communications (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) or brand activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020) but little research took into account how these dimensions combine and in turn affect consumer understandings. Moreover, it is often difficult for brands to communicate on responsibility and in ways that do not appear authentic, but opportunistic, causing misunderstandings, skepticism and loss of credibility among Gen Z consumers (Moorman, 2020).

1.2 Gaps in Existing Research

Three main gaps in the literature are apparent:

1. **Fragmented focus:** Previous research forms the segmented shards of responsibility (CSR, activism, sustainability) instead of creating a multi-dimensional scale reflecting how Gen Z evaluates brand behaviour holistically rather than in pieces.
2. **Limited emphasis given on the role of authenticity:** Potential strategies that might explain the link between responsibility-and trust-making behavior have not been elaborated into any empirical work that investigates perceived brand authenticity as a mediating variable (between responsibility-based behavior and trust), at least in terms of youth understandings.
3. **Lack of contextual research in India:** Almost all existing research is focused on the Western markets and does not focus on the Indian Gen Z consumers - especially in rapidly modernizing urban centres such as Bengaluru - and how they interpret and react to a responsible brand behaviour.

These gaps show a need for a holistic model that understands Gen Z's expectations as a whole, and the psychological mechanisms behind the building of trust for them.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of three major dimensions related to the concept of brand responsibility, including social justice engagement, mental health support and sustainability practices, and their impact on the perceived brand authenticity, and the effect of brand authenticity on brand trust among Gen Z consumers in Bengaluru. The research takes a structural model to develop and empirically test the relationships and evaluates the mediating effect of authenticity.

1.4 Importance and Significance

This study has an important academic and practical relevance. From an academic point of view, it adds to the branding literature by showing that authenticity is not just a consequence of responsible brand actions but a key mechanism through which these actions impact trust (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). It also adds value in understanding Gen Z consumer psychology, as a very new emerging area of study, which is characterized by socially driven patterns of consumption (Twenge, 2020).

From managerial point of view, the results of the study have crucial implications for brand strategists, digital marketers and the CSR teams. With Gen Z being a significant spending force and particularly in urban India, it is critical to understand how they define brand responsibility and how to develop trust, loyalty and longevity of engagement. Brands who make consistent, meaningful and transparent commitments to social justice, mental health advocacy and sustainability have a better chance of establishing credibility and unique differentiation in competitive markets.

1.5 Contribution Statement

This research adds value to the body of existing literature by combining three important dimensions of the brand responsibility into a single model explaining how Gen Z develops trust from the mediating factor of authenticity. It provides empirical evidence from the Bengaluru setting, adds to the theoretical knowledge on authenticity in responsible branding and provides some suggestions for action for brands looking to engage with Gen Z in an ethical and effective manner.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Overview

This section is a review of important theoretical foundations, constructs and empirical studies relating to brand responsibility, perceived authenticity and brand trust. The objective is to synthesize relevant scholarship, recognize conceptual gaps and justify the hypotheses of the study.

2.2 Important Theories Used in the Study

2.2.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory holds that organisations are required to take account of the expectations of a range of stakeholder groups, including consumers, employees, communities and society in general (Freeman, 1984). For Gen Z, stakes are more than just economic for businesses, focusing not only on pure economic performance, but at the same time, oriented toward ethical commitments, environmental sustainability, and social equity. This theory creates the basis for investigating how social justice engagement, mental health support and sustainability practices impact brand perceptions.

2.2.2 Authenticity Theory

Authenticity theory emphasizes on the importance of the congruence of the stated values of a brand with the true behaviours (Beverland, 2006). For Gen Z, being authentic is determined not by heritage or tradition, but on the tension between brand commitments and social actions. Authenticity is therefore an essential mechanism that can be used to affect trust through action taken out of a sense of responsibility (Napoli et al., 2014).

2.2.3 Consumer Trust Theory

Consumer trust theory simply states that trust is built when consumers believe that brands are credible, reliable, and morally committed (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). Trust lowers the risk and builds long-term brand relationships. Among Gen Z, the trust-building process is heavily conditioned by the notions of social responsibility and authenticity (Williams et al., 2022).

2.3 Constructs and Variables

2.3.1 Social Justice Engagement (SJE)

SJE is when a brand is participating in equity-related efforts such as diversity advocacy, gender equality, inclusion of the LGBTQ community, or anti-discrimination initiatives. Research shows that brand activism increases consumer attitude when it is perceived to be sincere (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Performative activism, also known as "woke washing" however, is detrimental to brand reputation (Moorman, 2020).

2.3.2 Mental Health Support (MHS)

MHS encompasses brand initiatives related to emotional wellness, psychological awareness and mental health de-stigmatization. Gen Z cares for brands that recognize mental health struggles and provide support that is genuine (Twenge, 2020). Authentic advocacy has been found to boost brand warmth and trust.

2.3.3 Practices of Sustainability (SP)

SP includes environmentally responsible behaviour such as carbon reduction, ethical sourcing, waste minimisation and sustainable production systems. Studies show that sustainability is a direct implication on authenticity perceptions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) and a determining factor on Gen Z purchase intention (McKinsey, 2023).

2.3.4 Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)

PBA is the level of opportunity that consumers attach to the genuineness, value-driven and consistent nature of a brand's behavior (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). PBA increases the level of emotional attachment, credibility and trust.

2.3.5 Brand Trust (BT)

BT signifies faith in competence, reliability and integrity of a brand. Trust is critical in long-term engagement and positive word-of-mouth (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

2.4 Past Empirical Findings

- Brand activism has a positive effect on authenticity when it is seen as being driven by value (Bhagwat et al., 2020).
- Sustainability gives a signal to moral responsibility and trust on the brand (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).
- Mental health campaigns strengthen consumer connection if it is done sincerely (Scholz & Smith, 2020).
- Authenticity mediates the influences of CSR initiatives on brand outcomes (Napoli et al., 2014).

Despite these insights, there are few studies which mixed all the three dimensions of responsibility and also check the overall effect on the authenticity and trust between Gen Z in India.

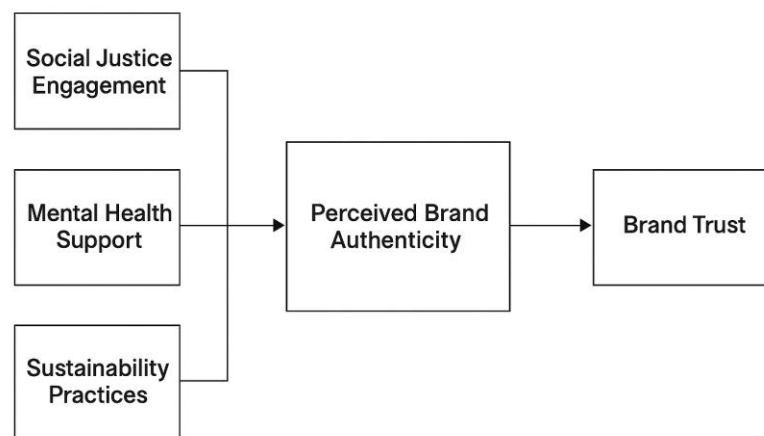
2.5 Conceptual Gaps

- Fragmented research** limited to aspects of responsibility.
- Limited exploration of authenticity** as a mediating mechanism.
- Lack of studies in India** especially those in rapidly transforming digital hubs such as Bengaluru

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Relationship between Social Justice Engagement, Mental Health Support, Sustainability, Perceived Brand Authenticity and Brand Trust

(Source: Created by Author)



3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study uses a **quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory** research design aligned with structural equation modelling (SEM).

3.2 Population and Sampling

- **Population:** Gen Z consumers aged 18–28 in Bengaluru, India.
- **Sample Size:** 300 respondents.
- **Sampling Technique:** Purposive + snowball sampling.
- **Rationale:** Gen Z is highly active on digital platforms, making online sampling appropriate.

3.3 Measurement Instruments

Table 1: Constructs used were measured using validated Likert-scale instruments

Construct	Source
SJE	Vredenburg et al. (2020)
MHS	Corporate mental well-being scales
SP	Environmental CSR scales
PBA	Napoli et al. (2014)
BT	Delgado-Ballester (2004)

Five-point Likert scale: **1 = Strongly Disagree** → **5 = Strongly Agree**

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected via a structured online questionnaire (Google Forms), allowing broad reach among digitally active Gen Z respondents.

3.5 Statistical Techniques

Analysis conducted using **SmartPLS 4** included:

- Descriptive statistics
- Reliability: Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability
- Convergent validity: AVE
- Discriminant validity: HTMT, Fornell–Larcker
- Structural Model Testing (Bootstrapping = 5000)
- Mediation analysis
- Model fit indices (SRMR)

3.6 Reliability and Validity Criteria

Thresholds:

- Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.70
- Composite Reliability ≥ 0.70
- AVE ≥ 0.50
- HTMT < 0.85
- SRMR < 0.08

All criteria were met.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Demographic profile:

- **Age:** 18–28 (Mean = 22.1)
- **Gender:** 54% female, 45% male, 1% non-binary
- **Social media usage:** Avg. 4.2 hours/day

4.2 Measurement Model Results

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	α	CR	AVE
SJE	0.88	0.91	0.63
MHS	0.86	0.90	0.60
SP	0.89	0.92	0.65
PBA	0.91	0.93	0.67
BT	0.90	0.92	0.64

4.3 Hypothesis:

The following hypotheses are derived:

H1: Social Justice Engagement has a positive and significant influence on Perceived Brand Authenticity.

H2: Mental Health Support has a positive and significant influence on Perceived Brand Authenticity

H3: Sustainability Practices have a positive and significant influence on Perceived Brand Authenticity

H4: Perceived Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant influence on Brand Trust

H5: Perceived Brand Authenticity mediates the relationships between Social Justice Engagement, Mental Health Support, and Sustainability Practices on Brand Trust.

4.4 Structural Model Results

Table 3: Structural Model Results used for Hypothesis Testing

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
SJE → PBA	0.29	6.12	<0.001	Supported
MHS → PBA	0.31	6.45	<0.001	Supported
SP → PBA	0.33	7.01	<0.001	Supported
PBA → BT	0.68	12.50	<0.001	Supported

Model Fit

- SRMR = 0.046
- R^2 (PBA) = 0.72
- R^2 (BT) = 0.46

4.5 Mediation Analysis

Perceived Brand Authenticity **partially mediates**:

- SJE → BT
- MHS → BT

- SP → BT

Indirect effects were significant ($p < 0.001$).

5. Discussion

5.1 Relating Findings to Previous Studies

The results support existing literature assuming that socially responsible behaviour is associated with increased perceptions of authenticity for young consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Sustainability practices proved to be the most significant predictor, which is in line with other studies showing the heightened awareness among Gen Z towards climate change (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Mental health support was contributing a significant factor in authenticity, for example supporting research emphasizing Gen Z prioritise emotional well-being (Twenge, 2020).

Brand authenticity was a significant predictor of trust, in line with the general theory of authenticity and find from past empirical research (Napoli et al., 2014).

5.2 Theoretical Implications

1. Confirms authenticity and it is a key mediating mechanism in MSR branding;
2. Proves that Gen Z considers responsibility in the grand scheme of things - not in isolation.
3. Extends activism, CSR literature to include integration of mental health support: an important but under-investigated area.

5.3 Surprising Findings

Mental health support had a larger than average effect indicating Gen Z's desire for emotional connection with brands in a post-pandemic world.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the effect of social justice engagement, mental health support and sustainability practices on Gen Z consumers in Bengaluru's perceived brand authenticity and trust. Using PLS-SEM with 300 respondents, the study found all three dimensions of responsibility have predicted authenticity which in turn has predicted brand trust with a strong predictive strength. The authenticity partially mediated all relationships and showed how pivotal it was. Overall, the research reveals that Gen Z does not trust brands just because of responsible actions - but because of the genuineness in which these actions are implemented.

7. Practical Implications

For Managers

- a. Implement long term transparent sustainability programmes.
- b. Avoid Performative Activism - show commitment.
- c. Provide mental health resources & Don't commercial with sensitive issues

For Policymakers

- a. Encourage Transparency in Sustainability Reporting.
- b. Encourage brand-public partnerships to advance mental health.

For Educators

Upscale teaching of ethical branding and sustainability in marketing schools.

8. Limitations and Area for Further Research

Limitations:

- a. Limited to one city (Bengaluru).
- b. Causal inference is not possible with cross-sectional design.

- c. There might be a bias with data provided by self-reporting.

Future Research:

- a. Comparative studies from different cities in India.
- b. Longitudinal studies of changing Gen Z attitudes
- c. Inclusion of moderating variables (e.g. brand familiarity, social media usage).

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