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Does Environmental Labelling Still Matter? Generation Z's Purchasing Decisions

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Abstract: This research paper explores the role of environmental labelling in shaping the purchasing and consumption behaviours of Generation Z. The study aims to provide insights into the comprehension, perception, and attitude of this generation towards environmental labelling and to investigate how these factors impact their purchasing decisions. The results of this study provide valuable insights into the role of environmental labelling in shaping the behaviours of young consumers and suggest that it still matters to this generation. The study also highlights the importance of trust in environmental labelling for influencing purchasing decisions. Our research paper provides new insights into the role of environmental labelling in shaping the behaviours of Generation Z, which is a critical demographic group for sustainable consumption. We found that this generation is highly aware of environmental issues and is motivated to make eco-friendly purchasing decisions. However, our study also highlights that the lack of trust in environmental labelling can be a significant barrier to sustainable consumption. This study contributes to the literature on environmental labelling and consumer behaviour among Generation Z.

Keywords: environmental labelling; environmental products; Generation Z; environmental management; green marketing

1. Introduction

When making everyday purchases, the conscious consumer must struggle not only with the marketing activities of producers of goods or carefully thought-out sales strategies of stores but also with a huge amount of information contained on small and very colourful product packages. In this field, environmental labelling must compete with all the information on the packaging, because the main goal of it is to distinguish environmentally safe products throughout their lifecycle, and, after all, encouraging consumers to buy such products is crucial for the current far-reaching policy of sustainable development [1]. The increase in sales of ecological products and the elimination of those whose production or use causes a significant burden on the natural environment is possible thanks to the proper identification of these products by consumers. In this context, environmental labelling is considered to be one of the best tools to promote ecological products that influence purchasing decisions [2–4]. Theoretically, this tool should, therefore, facilitate the choice of ecological products by consumers; however, they often do not have enough expertise and time to analyse the products they buy for a long time [5], and in the case of environmental labelling, knowledge and awareness are the essential keys for correct interpretation of

environmental signs. Despite the emergence of environmentally conscious consumers in the West during the 1960s and 1970s (in response to the environmental impacts of industrial development), some consumers are still not actively engaged in green consumer groups [6]. The main barrier for these consumers, particularly in developing countries, is still the higher costs associated with environmentally friendly products, as highlighted by [7].

Due to the fact that environmental labelling is used in different countries, it should be emphasized that each country has its own unique socioeconomic conditions and resources at its disposal; thus, decisions made by consumers with regard to purchasing ecological products vary [8,9]. Current research presents varying perspectives that call for additional investigation to better understand the underlying factors that shape the attitudes of young consumers towards the concept of sustainability, specifically with regard to ecolabels, as noted by [10]. Generation Z is more uniquely diverse than any previous group of college students [11]. According to Pew Research Center, Generation Z students spend approximately 9 h per day on their cell phones. This heavy reliance on mobile technology has significant implications not only for how this generation learns, but also for how instructors should deliver instructional material. The instant gratification and immediate frustration that come with this wired environment can impact their learning experience. Furthermore, the average attention span of Generation Z individuals has decreased to 8 s, compared to 12 s for Millennials [11]. John Ratey from Harvard Medical School referred to this trend as "acquired attention deficit disorder". Generation Z students' brains have become wired to process complex visual imagery, making visual approaches to teaching more effective than other methods [12]. This trend can be interesting in the case of choosing ecological products, i.e., products with environmental labels.

Therefore, the substantive premises of this choice are the following:

1. The historical association between green consumerism and young consumers can be traced back to the advocacy of green values by youth movements that have aimed to decrease consumption and promote ethical awareness, as highlighted by [13].
2. Despite the fact that young consumers may exhibit tendencies towards excessive consumption and conspicuous spending habits, there is also a growing trend towards social and environmental awareness among them, as noted by [14]. This shift is particularly evident due to technological advancements that have influenced young consumers' lifestyles [15].
3. Young consumers are increasingly acknowledging that green consumerism can play a crucial role in addressing environmental issues [13].
4. The younger generation of consumers, often referred to as Generation Z (Post-Millennials), generally exhibits a positive attitude toward sustainability as a whole, according to the existing literature [16]. They are often portrayed as more inclined towards sustainable behaviours compared to older generations. However, there is a discrepancy between their attitudes and their actual consumption behaviours when it comes to sustainability, as highlighted by studies [14].

The aim of this research paper is to provide insight into the comprehension, perception, and attitude of young consumers towards environmental labelling, and to explore how these factors may impact their purchasing and consumption behaviours. The goal is to better understand the role that environmental labelling plays in shaping the behaviours of young consumers. The main purpose of the article is to indicate the role of environmental labelling in purchasing decisions of consumers and to define their trust in environmental labelling. The research also covers the directions for improving this tool.

It would therefore be interesting to compare the opinions and factors shaping consumer product choices in other countries, focusing on environmental labelling aspects. Considering the multitude of different environmental labels available, trying to understand their impact on consumers and identifying the factors that determine the final choice of buyers is practically the only way to improve the efficiency and functionality of environmental labelling throughout the EU [17].

The article follows a structured organization with distinct sections dedicated to exploring various facets of the research topic. It commences with the Introduction, which serves to provide an overview of the research area and set the context for subsequent discussions. This section introduces the primary research questions that guide the investigation. The Literature Review constitutes a crucial part of the article. It is divided into subsections, beginning with an exploration of different types of environmental labels used for consumer products. Following this, the Literature Review continues by examining the role of environmental labelling as a trigger for purchasing ecological products. Subsequently, the review delves into the matter of consumer trust in environmental labelling. The last subsection under Literature Review focuses on identifying areas of improvement for environmental labelling. The Data Source and Methodology section delineates the chosen research approach and data collection method. It provides insight into how the research questions were addressed. The Results section presents the outcomes of the research, further subdivided into distinct subsections. These subsections detail the recognizability of various types of environmental labelling, the role of such labelling in influencing purchasing decisions, levels of consumer trust, and potential improvements in environmental labelling design. Discussion follows, where the results are interpreted and synthesized in relation to the existing literature. This section also provides a platform to address the research contributions and implications arising from the findings. The Conclusions section encapsulates the study's core findings, outlining its contributions to the field. It acknowledges limitations inherent to the research and suggests avenues for future exploration. In this manner, the article's comprehensive structure sequentially covers all facets of the research, from introduction to conclusions, allowing for a coherent and insightful exploration of Generation Z's recognition of environmental labelling and its impact on their purchasing decisions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Environmental Labels Used for Consumer Products

Environmental labelling is one of the environmental management tools, one of the main tasks of which is to make ecological products more visible and thus make it possible to distinguish ecological products from conventional products quickly [18]. Ecological products are products that consist of safe materials and nontoxic ingredients that can be reused and do not have a negative impact on the environment throughout their lifecycle [19]. This is of particular importance in the context of the ever-increasing number of products and services on the market, because, as a consequence, these products are considered to be of greater value than conventional products [20], and consumer choice can significantly contribute to reducing the negative impact on the environment [21]. Thanks to environmental labelling, the asymmetry of information about the ecological characteristics of products between producers and consumers is reduced [22].

Analytical research on consumer preferences regarding the labelling of products with environmental labelling conducted in six European countries (Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, Denmark) indicates that of all the nationalities covered by the study, the inhabitants of Italy were the most willing to pay more for products featuring the EU organic logo. In turn, the citizens of the Czech Republic and Denmark believed that more expenditure should be invested in symbols issued under the patronage of their governments. Moreover, it has been shown that higher ratings in terms of trust, credibility, standards, and a label control system translate into higher ratings for environmental labels [23].

Despite the increasing number of consumers expressing concerns about the socioenvironmental impact of their purchases [17,24], there is often a lack of corresponding behaviours that align with these attitudes, as evidenced in the literature [25]. This disconnection, commonly known as the "attitude–behaviour gap", poses significant challenges for policymakers, companies, and nonprofit organizations that seek to promote sustainable consumption [26].

Research on the role played by environmental labelling indicates a research gap, as few studies have analysed the impact of various labels on purchasing decisions on Generation Z, which is due to the relatively large number of such labels and significant differences in recognition levels in individual countries.

An Annunziata, Mariani, and Vecchio [27] study conducted among younger consumers in Italy analysed labels as Organic Logo, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, and Libera Terra. The most recognizable of the aforementioned labels were Organic Logo and Fair Trade, where 60% and 56% of respondents, respectively, declared that they had seen these labels. The Rainforest Alliance and Libera Terra labels were recognized by significantly fewer respondents. In the case of the other labels, the levels of correct answers were 25% for Libera Terra and approximately 15% for Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance, respectively.

An analysis of the literature showed that the most commonly used environmental labels in Europe are the EU Organic Logo (green leaf), EU Ecolabel, the "BIO" label, Fair Trade, and Rainforest Alliance, although the recognition and popularity of these symbols among consumers vary from country to country.

Therefore, the first research question is:

RQ1: What types of environmental labels on consumer products do Generation Z recognize?

2.2. Environmental Labelling as a Trigger of Purchase for Ecological Products

Consumer research [28] also confirms that health and environmental issues are the main determinants shaping the decisions of respondents when it comes to buying ecological food products. This fact is confirmed by the results of the "2020 Food & Health Survey" (IFIC) report, in which 59% of respondents considered sustainable development issues important when purchasing food. At the same time, 60% did not know whether their food choices were environmentally friendly. Despite this fact, there are numerous studies that confirm the willingness of consumers to pay more for ecological products. This is the case with such products as beef [29], biscuits [30], chocolate [31], fruit [32] tomato purée [33], and fish [34,35]. Another study [36] demonstrated the willingness of consumers to pay a higher price for items in the production of which endangered animal species do not suffer, which also indicates considerable consumer sensitivity.

Chen [37] made an important observation regarding environmental messaging aimed at consumers, showing that formulating negative messages about the state of the environment has a considerable impact on consumer behaviour. Environmentally destructive content created a more convincing message for consumers and triggered purchasing responses for ecological products.

According to research conducted in Eastern Europe, the factors that weaken interest in products with environmental labels include high prices (60%) and difficulties finding them in stores (17%) [38]. Annunziata, Mariani, and Vecchio [27] drew attention to the problem of low label visibility, which suggests that label visibility has a significant impact on consumers' decisions to buy and use ecological products. Another purchasing barrier is inadequate knowledge, which limits understanding of environmental labelling on products [39–41]. This problem can be solved through more campaigns and educational programmes aimed at the public [42]. An effective information policy aimed at individual market segments can help disseminate knowledge of the assumptions of sustainable development.

Therefore, the second research question is:

RQ2: What is the role of environmental labelling in the purchasing decisions of representatives of Generation Z?

2.3. Consumer Trust in Environmental Labelling

Consumer confidence in labelling has been the subject of frequent research, which indicates a need to convince consumers of the necessity to use products bearing environmental labels [43–47]. Trust has a considerable impact on attitudes and purchasing behaviour on the market. According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour model, trust has a positive and

significant impact in that it reinforces purchasing behaviour and reduces the gap in the intention–behaviour relationship [48]. Therefore, it is a prerequisite for creating a market for green products [49].

A lack of trust in environmental content and statements undermines the willingness of consumers to buy such products [50]. Consumers are afraid of finding themselves in a situation where, when paying a higher price for a product, they may be cheated in this way [51]. After all, the ecological features and attributes of products are very often difficult, or even impossible, to verify even after making a purchase. Therefore, trust and credibility are inherent factors motivating consumers to choose products with environmental labels [52]. Khare and Pandey indicate that consumers place trust in ecological food products on a par with such purchasing determinants as quality, taste, freshness, and variety [53].

One factor that clearly undermines the credibility of ecological products is misleading and unfounded information regarding the proenvironmental characteristics of products, i.e., the practice of "greenwashing" [54]. Greenwashing is an unethical approach adopted by enterprises or organizations which in their external communications foster an image that is more ecological than is the case in reality [55]. Undoubtedly, such actions have a negative impact on consumer confidence. Unfortunately, labels are a common tool used by companies to advertise unsubstantiated proenvironmental activities. This is probably due to the many advantages of directing market communication through labels. Above all, they serve as tools that very easily and quickly shape customer perceptions. Of course, greenwashing is not without risk, in that it makes companies appear unreliable. Nevertheless, greenwashing is still a common occurrence.

Trust in labels and producers may also be undermined by occasional scandals involving acts of deliberate falsification in the production of ecological products, including food [56]. Regulatory weaknesses and imperfect regulatory systems have enabled the misapplication of environmental labelling on the marketplace [57,58], thereby undermining the credibility of the overall system [59]. For example, more than half of all end consumers in the United States (USA) expressed a lack of confidence in a product's ecological characteristics, as confirmed by its environmental labelling [60]. Likewise, consumers also question the credibility of these tools in some developing countries such as China and Malaysia [61,62].

According to Gorton et al. [63], it is very important for consumers that they can trust the institutions responsible for the environmental labelling certification process. If trust in these institutions is high, consumers will be more inclined to purchase products bearing such labels. In addition, an important conclusion emerges from a study by Razzolini [64], in which it was found that consumers have more confidence in larger producers using environmental labelling. This may be connected with the perception of large enterprises as being more transparent and caring more about their own brand [64].

The research results cited above show the factors that influence the level of consumer trust in the environmental labelling of ecological products. However, these results are fragmented and unclear, especially in the context of Generation Z. Hence, the third research question is:

RQ3: How do we increase confidence in environmental labels among representatives of Generation Z?

2.4. Areas of Improvement for Environmental Labelling

An analysis of environmental labelling studies also reveals a number of limitations associated with the environmental labelling systems currently in use [65–67]. The problems identified include saturation and an overabundance of labels and environmental content. Some studies indicate that this may lead to confusion and discouragement of consumers, and, in the longer term, to sceptical attitudes towards environmental labelling [57]. The ubiquitous and parallel existence of multiple labelling systems makes it difficult for consumers to learn about all of them [67]. Too many environmental labelling claims and excessive environmental information turn out to be ineffective [68]. In addition, there are

still proposals to create new systems, such as NaturSkånsom in Denmark [66], which would result in even more labels.

In addition to an excessive number of labels, another major concern is their form. Consumers are clearly more in favour of using graphic logos and are not satisfied with information in word form alone [23]. Rihn, Wei, and Khachatryan [69] reached similar conclusions. According to their research, logotypes attract more attention than text-based labels. Moreover, an additional effect of using logos is that consumers were ready to pay more for their presence on products than for labels in the form of text [69]. The differences resulting from the use of different forms of labels were also investigated by [70]. They determined that consumers attach more importance to products with environmental labels [71].

With regard to the graphics of environmental labelling, experiments have been conducted that show that products promoted with these labels featuring the colour green undermine perceptions of the effectiveness of products such as cleaning products or cosmetics [72]. Research by Felix et al. [73] indicates a similar problem regarding the promotion and distinctiveness of ecological products. Men have a negative perception of green, especially in products where effectiveness is an important factor (detergents and engine oils). This pattern is not observed in women. In such situations, the authors of the study suggest using persuasive slogans and fonts or associating the product with influencers and celebrities. Such ways of reinforcing the message may have a positive impact on men's purchasing decisions [74].

In several cases, researchers pointed to the need for environmental labelling certification by a third party, which was seen as a necessary requirement for increasing trust and credibility [63,75,76]. Such a course of action may counter the image of unreliability associated with some labels that has been identified in the literature [77]. It should be emphasized that, in accordance with ISO 14024, the type I environmental labelling program [78] is based on a multicriteria assessment procedure conducted by a third party responsible for granting permission for environmental labels on products. This label indicates the environmental preference of the labelled product within the product category resulting from a lifecycle analysis. The purpose of Type I environmental labelling is to reduce environmental impact of products and services by identifying those that meet specific environmental preference criteria. The authors of [79] indicate that Type I environmental labelling is based on the concept of eco-efficiency. Thus, the supervision of environmental labelling carried out by independent organizations ensures greater credibility for the standards and the label control system, which translates into a higher rating for the environmental label [23]. Another activity that can increase sales of ecological products is the involvement of supply chain actors, especially direct sellers. Uchida et al. found that consumers rely heavily on the recommendations of their sellers when purchasing a product [80].

Based on the literature review presented above, the fourth research question is:

RQ4: How do we increase the potential of environmental labelling to initiate purchasing decisions for ecological products by representatives of Generation Z?

3. Methodology

To achieve the adopted goals, the research was designed and conducted on the basis of focus group interviews (FGIs). Therefore, a qualitative analysis of the data was carried out in the work. The goals set and adopted in the work seem to fit perfectly into the methods and techniques of qualitative analysis, where a greater and more useful role for the researcher is played by broad and free statements by focus group participants. Qualitative data of this type and their analysis are well established in science. In the context of the analysis of environmental labels, the exploratory character of the applied qualitative research seems to be very useful and interesting. Due to the fact that the ecolabels are used in virtually all regions of the world, to limit the scope of the study, representatives of two countries were selected for analysis: Italy and Poland. Such an assumption made it possible to include the research data from a very well-developed country, where ecological

awareness is already formed—Italy. This country leads the way in the number of ecolabelled products in Europe [81]. In turn, Poland represents European countries where the process of economic transformation and the development of environmental awareness is only slowly beginning to take shape, and the activity in implementing proecological policy is definitely lower than in Western European countries. In the scientific literature, there are many items where these countries are the object of mutual comparisons, such as the digitization of enterprises [82], minimum income [83], and the employment of women [84]. In view of the above, it should be considered that the selection of respondents from these countries is correct.

3.1. Study Setting and Design

The recommended number of participants in focus groups is often between six and twelve [85]. Hence, the number of participants involved in our study was commensurate with other studies that used semistructured interviews and focus group studies [86–89]. All FGIs were conducted online and moderated by environmental labelling specialists, as well as with the help of an assistant who helped deal with organizational issues. The FGI moderators in Italy and Poland were researchers who are experts in this field. This selection of moderators guaranteed flawless understanding of the discussed issues due to the languages in which the research was conducted and the cultural codes adopted for the groups from Italy and Poland. Interviews in both countries were conducted in parallel, and moderators from both countries stayed in contact with each other to conduct research as homogeneously as possible. The main role of the moderator was to encourage participants to share ideas and express their views in the analysed area, which is also in line with the research practices of other authors [90,91]. During the interviews, the moderator described, inter alia, selected environmental labels, which were presented on the board. This approach was intended to inspire the respondents to express their opinions and provide suggestions on the possibilities of developing this tool. The interviews lasted 80–100 min and were taped. The study participants were informed about the recording of the study and gave their consent. Each of the study participants was informed about the anonymity of the study and the possibility of stopping it at any time by the participant. In addition, during the research, the moderators made their own notes, which initially allowed us to draw interesting observations from the research, useful for the analysis of the results and further discussion. Then, a transcription was made (Figure 1). It should be pointed out that in the present research the authors achieved the theoretical saturation point recommended by Wodskou et al. [85], as no new observations regarding the aim of the study appeared in the recent interviews.

3.2. Participants and Data Collection Procedure

This study covered a total of eight focus groups formed in the second quarter of 2021, five of which comprised Polish consumer groups, while three were made up of Italian consumer groups. Taking part in the group interviews were 34 respondents from Poland and 18 respondents from Italy. The respondents were selected on the basis of purposive sampling. The focus group members represented Generation Z. Interviews were conducted with the invited participants and key research topics were discussed with the help of a moderator. Table 1 presents the general characteristics of the focus group. In turn, Table 2 contains a detailed description of the respondents participating in focus groups.

The selection of respondents was purposeful and consisted of inviting only people who met the age criterion to participate in the study. This is related to the fulfilment of the main criteria of the study, being an analysis of the behaviour of representatives of Generation Z. The second aspect showing that our selection was intentional is the fulfilment of the criterion of equal representation of respondents by gender. Equally, 50% of women and men took part in the study. In terms of nationality, Poland was slightly more represented than Italy, but this imbalance was not high.
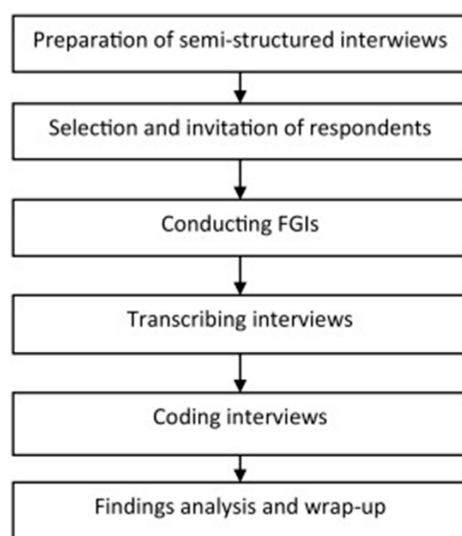
Figure 1. Data collection and analysis study plan.

Table 1. General characteristics of focus group (*n* = 52).

Focus Groups	Number of People	F/M	Country
1	6	3/3	Italy
2	6	3/3	Italy
3	6	3/3	Italy
4	6	3/3	Poland
5	9	4/5	Poland
6	7	4/3	Poland
7	6	3/3	Poland
8	6	3/3	Poland

Table 2. Detailed characteristics of the respondents (*n* = 52).

Variables of the Respondents		*n*	%
Gender	Female	26	50
	Male	26	50
Age	20–24	52	100
Education	Undergraduate	20	38
	Bachelor's degree	32	62
Nationality	Italy	18	35
	Poland	34	65

Each of the respondents invited to participate in the study gave their written consent. They were informed about the purpose of the research and the possibilities of future presentation of the collected material in peer-reviewed scientific publications. In the first stage of the focus group, the respondents were greeted and introduced to the researched subject. Respondents were informed about the anonymity of the study and familiarized with the conditions for storing data obtained during the study. The next stage of the focus group concerned the recognition of environmental labels by representatives of Generation Z. The third stage focused on the role of environmental labels in the purchase of various products. The fourth stage was devoted to the factors that can inspire and create consumer confidence in environmental labelling schemes. In the fifth step, focus group discussions were held on environmental label design and graphics aimed at increasing the marketability of labels. In the last stage, the collected information was summarized. Each of the participants could exercise the right to freely speak and discuss the topic. After that, the focus group was completed.

3.3. Data Analysis

MAXQDA and FreeMind qualitative data analysis software was used to analyse the interviews. The coded material was gathered from answers to questions on three main topics: respondents' opinions about environmental products and environmental labelling, trust in environmental labelling, and areas of possible improvement for eco-products. To analyse the statements, the authors made use of open, two-hierarchical coding, that is, in the first place, detailed codes were established, which were grouped together with common topics. The data were anonymized and handled according to protocols existing in Krakow University of Economics and University of Torino.

4. Results

The presentation of the research results was based on the specified topics and categories. A synthesis of the results was prepared in the form of a mind map (Figure 2), which, being a graphical tool, allows for a collective presentation of all identified categories.
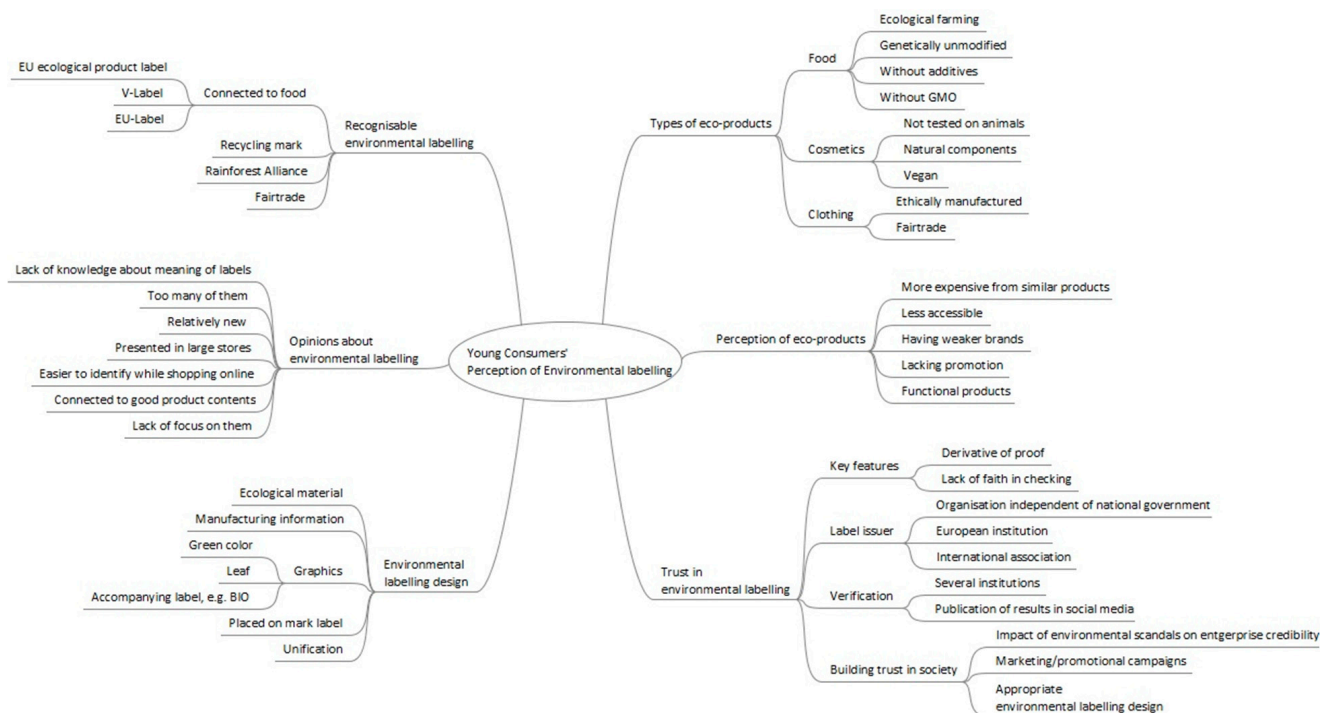

Figure 2. A mind map for topics and categories related to environmental labelling perception by young consumers.

Figure 2 depicts the two-level codes clustered into six areas derived from four main topics: opinions about environmental products, environmental labelling, trust in environmental labelling, and areas of possible improvement for eco-products.

4.1. Recognisable Types of Environmental Labelling

When asked about eco-products, representatives of Generation Z paid attention to their types. Ecological products included food, cosmetics, and clothes, with the respondents from Poland referring more often to the first two types, and Italians to the latter. Different features were indicated for each type, which prompted the isolation of separate labels related to the environment. Eco-food denoted fruit, vegetables, dairy products, i.e., unprocessed food that is the product of ecological agriculture (e.g., pesticide-free), which does not contain additives, is not genetically modified, and has a known place of origin. In the case of cosmetic products, the ecological values included the following: not tested on animals, contain natural ingredients, vegan. These products are also characterized by a varied composition, the description of which is based on a specialized chemical terminol-

ogy, which, on the one hand, excludes an independent assessment of the environmental performance of a product, and, on the other, extends the time required to check a label in order to familiarize oneself with the listed ingredients. On the other hand, eco-clothes are associated with ethical production practices and fair trade.

General opinions about eco-products, not directly related to the above types of products, characterized such products as more expensive than similar products (in each focus group, this was emphasized), less available, with weaker brands, and without strong promotion, treated as functional products (e.g., ecological food for people with gastric ailments, cosmetics for people with allergies).

Apart from the ecological characteristics of a product itself, the representatives of Generation Z showed interest in the ecological nature of the packaging. In response to the question regarding how and where such products are purchased, it was pointed out that eco-products are more visible in larger retailers, and that consumers tend to buy them in shops rather than online [92]. This is confirmed by the transcription:

"Ecological products on the Internet can probably only be bought in brick-and-mortar stores. I have not seen them in my online store where I often shop" (female, Polish, undergraduate).

The following criteria are taken into account in purchasing decisions: product composition, impact on health, environmental friendliness, including eco-friendly methods of production, and featuring an environmental label (certificate). It was observed that in the event of a choice between two similarly priced products, the presence of such a label would be a decisive factor in purchasing decisions.

Of the 28 environmental labels presented in the study, the respondents recognized 13, and when it came to others, they added the OEKO-TEX label. The most commonly recognized environmental labels by representatives of Generation Z were food-related (10), while cosmetics and clothes each had one identifiable ecolabel. The most recognizable label was the EU Organic Logo (12 mentions), followed by the V-Label (9), EU Ecolabel (5), the recycling label (4), Rainforest Alliance (4), and Fair Trade (3). The other labels received two or fewer mentions. The Italian respondents recognized Fair Trade labels more often, while the Polish respondents identified the recycling label. National labels were mentioned once.

The high level of recognition enjoyed by European labels, as well as those with an international character (V-label, Rainforest Alliance Certified seal), among respondents from both EU countries comes as no surprise. The differences between the respondents regarding certain ecolabels can be explained by other purchasing preferences, as well as the availability of products with a given ecolabel on the market of a given country.

4.2. The Role of Environmental Labelling in Product Purchasing Decisions

In seven out of eight focus groups, the respondents admitted that they did not pay much attention to environmental labelling, which is due to less interest in ecological products. Despite this fact, they recognize such labels (see above), but Generation Z cannot explain what they mean. In their opinion, there are too many environmental labels, which confuses the buyer. It has been pointed out that environmental labelling is relatively new. The interviews emphasized the need for graphic standardization when it came to countries and forms (design, e.g., green—for plants, blue—for fish). Respondents see environmental labelling in large stores, which is a result of the separate places designated for these products (e.g., shelves, aisles). An example of this is the transcription:

"In hypermarkets it is easier to find ecological products. These zones are marked in green and are easy to get to. In this zone, all products are ecological, so you don't have to look for ecolabels anymore" (male, Polish, bachelor's degree).

The representatives of Generation Z believe that when shopping at online stores, it is easier to find an ecological product thanks to the use of filtering criteria. Their appearance is related to the good composition of the product. Polish respondents showed limited confidence in labels, associating them more with a marketing gimmick.

Environmental labelling is taken into account when buying more expensive products and also when specific preferences are involved, e.g., those related to diet. The role of a

brand and consumer loyalty were also mentioned. Apart from the certificate itself, its issuer is also important, because the purchase of a given product can be treated as expressing support for a given organization.

4.3. Consumer Trust in Environmental Labelling

According to the representatives of Generation Z, trust is key in the perception of environmental labelling, a fact that was mentioned in six of the seven group interviews. Statements related to this topic can be grouped into four categories: (1) opinions on environmental labelling, (2) characteristics of an organization issuing environmental labelling, (3) verification of labels, and (4) actions increasing trust in environmental labelling.

Environmental labelling should be based on evidence that the product or manufacturing process meets environmental criteria. Such a certificate increases confidence in the declared ecological nature of the production process. The respondents indicated an absence of complete trust, which is due to a lack of belief that such a product can be fully checked, as well as their suspicion that standards may be circumvented.

The above issue is closely related to the question of who or what should have the right to issue environmental labelling or certificates. The respondents offered a number of suggestions on this matter, claiming it should be one of the following: (a) a national institution independent of the government, (b) an EU institution, (c) an international association, or (d) many different supervisory organizations. The Italian respondents were more inclined to entrust this task to European institutions, just like Polish respondents, although in the latter group, there were more opinions in favour of a national institution performing this function. This is confirmed by the transcript:

"It is a very good idea to certify ecological products by a single European institution" (male, Italian, bachelor's degree).

The importance of certification for consumers is further confirmed by the confidence expressed by the respondents in products that someone else has checked.

Verification should be carried out by national institutions (Polish respondents), as well as by associations that publish the results of such audits in social media. Social media is also emerging as an important channel of trust-enhancing activities. Here, the respondents mentioned the influence exerted by scandals and marketing (information) campaigns. Building social awareness of environmental labelling, including promotional campaigns, via, for example, environmental labelling information displays in shops, is important for building trust. Another key factor is appropriately designed environmental labelling, as is presented below.

4.4. Environmental Labelling Design

In the opinion of representatives of Generation Z, environmental labelling (sign) should take into account a number of factors. The first is the material, which should be ecological. The second issue is the content of environmental labelling, which should, for example, contain information on the amount of CO_2 generated during the production process as well as the method of production. Respondents suggested including brief information on this issue. The third issue was the graphic of the label. The respondents suggested that it should be green, which is perceived as the colour most associated with the environment, and which, at the same time, stands out against the background of the packaging. Apart from the shape itself—here, the recognizable form of a leaf was mentioned—the respondents suggested adding an appropriate note, e.g., BIO (word mark). The need to add supplementary information in the form of a description or the name of the certificate is connected with the fact that the symbol itself does not have to be clearly associated with a specific environmental aspect (e.g., vegan, fair trade, ecological production method). Complementary to the above is the suggestion that the label should be made larger. In the context of international markets, the respondents from Generation Z raised the issue of unifying and standardizing labels with regard to both the abovementioned issues and the location of the labels. The respondents indicated that the certification symbol

should be placed on the front of the packaging, next to the name of the product, and not on the back.

5. Discussion

As emphasized by the literature [20,93], the significance of environmental labelling is experiencing a pronounced rise among both consumers and producers. This is attributed to its ability to mark products of heightened value while concurrently contributing to mitigating their detrimental ecological impact. Conversely, a critical juncture has been reached in appraising how the emerging Generation Z of consumers evaluates ecolabelling's relevance within the market landscape.

In addressing the first research question (RQ1), which inquires about respondents' identification of environmentally friendly product categories, several noteworthy observations emerge. Discernible trends encompass categories such as food, cosmetics, and clothing—established segments were frequently associated with labels concerned with ecological issues. Pertinently, participants from Generation Z underscore the pivotal role of packaging, which they deem inherently intertwined with the product itself. Their ecological considerations inevitably encompass this facet. A significant finding arising from focus group interviews (FGIs) pertains to the preference for graphic logos over text-based information. Standardized graphical representations are seen as potential contributors to enhancing the visibility of sustainable products. This finding resonates with Annunziata et al.'s research [27]. Among recognizable symbols, the Organic Logo garners most mentions (12 instances), while Rainforest Alliance (4 mentions) and Fair Trade (3 mentions) manifest a less robust recognition.

The second research question (RQ2) probes participants' perspectives on information saturation and its potential influence on consumer behaviour. A shared consensus emerges among interviewees, elucidating a prevalent sense of information overload. This overload potentially propels consumers towards two distinct directions: either sustaining their existing consumption patterns by refraining from deeper engagement with the issue or gravitating exclusively towards products bearing familiar and "eco-friendly" logos. Instances include products sporting the BIO logo or being prominently displayed at sales points [92]. Crucially, the study underscores the challenge Generation Z consumers face in accessing such products, stemming from availability and price issues. Notably, larger retailers feature a more prominent selection, prompting physical store purchases. In contrast, online shopping offers enhanced product discoverability, facilitated by filtering options that accommodate various criteria, including certificates, materials, production methods, and recycled packaging. However, the financial aspect poses a barrier as green products remain notably pricier than conventional alternatives in both Italy and Poland. Consequently, purchasing inclinations tend to favour nonlabelled products. The study advocates for a streamlined and impactful communication strategy, employing straightforward and effective claims to facilitate consumer comprehension of environmental label content. This strategic approach is projected to foster broader dissemination of the environmental sustainability ethos, encompassing both production and retail phases.

The third research question (RQ3) delves into the strategies that could bolster confidence in environmental labels among Generation Z representatives. The contemporary literature [53] asserts that trust in labelling constitutes a foundational prerequisite for nurturing a market for green products—a notion validated by six of the seven Generation Z interviews. For information to inspire credibility and reliability, FGIs identify the demand for a "third party" entity that can scrutinize and verify statements made by sector participants. This stipulation aligns with recent studies [63,75,76]. Certifications of this nature amplify consumer confidence in a product's or production process's ecological claims. Such endorsements signify an independent assessment validating the fulfilment of prerequisites essential for branding a product with an environmentally conscious emblem. This holds marked significance for Generation Z representatives.

Consumer trust, frequently challenged by instances of deceptive "green" corporate communication and practices (greenwashing), necessitates more robust safeguards. These guarantees can be administered by supranational bodies (e.g., EU) or national entities, aligning with the study's FGIs findings and the corroborating literature. Instances of falsified ecological products or misleading information, as epitomized by the "greenwashing" practices of certain enterprises, exert influence. Intriguingly, while considerable confidence is placed in larger corporations, this sentiment is met with contradiction in interview responses.

Lastly, research question four (RQ4) pertains to bolstering the visibility of environmental labelling through design enhancements. The issue of label saturation and the consequent dilution of effective consumer information, both for food and nonfood items, emerges from the literature [66,67]. The study's findings underline the necessity for actions aimed at enhancing the recognizability of these labels. Echoing Lyon's and Montgomery's observations [57], FGIs contend that many symbols and informational elements present on packaging are unfamiliar and potentially perplexing. To counteract this situation, FGIs propose suggestions that largely harmonize with the review's literature section, facilitating a more coherent and comprehensible portrayal of environmental labelling.

6. Research Contributions/Implications

This research aims at gathering viewpoints concerning the significance of environmental labels in product choices in two EU Member States: Italy and Poland. Environmental labels are relatively novel instruments that nonetheless hold a pivotal place in the environmental sustainability strategies enacted by individual nations.

Notwithstanding the initial assumption, i.e., that Poland and Italy are countries with different sensitivities towards these matters, all participants in the focus groups displayed engagement in the addressed subjects. They raised pertinent points for discussion, underscoring the universality of the topic.

As mentioned before, the findings emphasize that ample room remains for enhancing consumer confidence in such products; some implications may be presented both from a theoretical and a practical point of view.

The findings of the study contribute to existing research by shedding light on Generation Z's perceptions and understanding of environmental labels and their influence on product choices. Specifically, it is possible to highlight three main contributions: (i) the identification of recognizable environmental labels; (ii) the examination of recognition patterns; and (iii) the role of trust in environmental labels. With reference to the first (i), the study contributes to theory by identifying and categorizing distinct types of environmental labels recognized by Generation Z. These categories are aligned with specific product types, such as eco-food, eco-cosmetics, and eco-clothes, each carrying unique attributes that define eco-friendly characteristics. By investigating which environmental labels are recognized by respondents (ii), the research extends the theoretical understanding of the familiarity of certain labels among Generation Z consumers. The differences in recognition between Italian and Polish respondents provide insights into variations in consumer preferences and market availability. Finally (iii), the study delves into the concept of consumer trust in environmental labels, grouping trust-related opinions into distinct categories. This offers a comprehensive view of the multifaceted nature of trust in ecolabels and their underlying mechanisms.

The subsequent practical implications of the findings provide guidance for marketers, policymakers, and organizations seeking to enhance Generation Z's understanding of and trust in environmental labels.

The research recommends enhancing label design, including factors such as material, content, graphics, and placement, so as to offer actionable insights for practitioners to create more effective and visually appealing ecolabels. This can simplify consumer decision making and enhance label recognition. The importance of graphic standardization and unification of environmental labels across international markets is addressed. Practitioners

can benefit from this insight by collaborating with industry partners and regulatory bodies to create consistent and universally recognizable labels.

Both extant research and the results arising from focus group discussions outline that most symbols and information available on a label look unfamiliar to investigated consumers; therefore, emphasis is set on enhancing information dissemination and promotional initiatives, as well as implementing educational programs. Incorporating sustainability education into school and university curricula, and teaching about the environmental impact of different products as well as the meaning of ecolabels, can contribute to increase the awareness of Generation Z in their purchasing decisions. Consequently, policymakers and educators can draw on the study's findings to design educational programs that raise consumer awareness of the environmental impact of products and the meaning behind different ecolabels. This aligns with Generation Z's desire for clearer information.

The findings also emphasize the need for clear and uniform communication through information displays, promotional campaigns, and social media. It is of the outmost importance to shape a uniform approach to communication, encompassing both visual and verbal elements, so as to streamline the consumer decision-making process during the product purchase stage. It might be crucial to turn to social media influencers who are aligned with sustainability values in order to promote ecolabelled products. Generation Z often looks up to influencers for guidance, and if these influencers endorse eco-friendly choices, it can significantly impact their buying decisions.

To be effective, communication, being a strategic lever for increasing visibility and, consequently, purchases of this kind of products, must be transparent for establishing trust in consumers. Business operators should provide detailed information about the criteria behind their ecolabels, their sourcing practices, and their efforts to reduce their environmental footprint in order to help consumers verify the authenticity of ecolabel claims. Consumers should not be destabilized by asking them to choose one product rather than another and they should be helped to understand the added value of a "green" product.

The study's insights into actions that can enhance trust, such as evidence-based certification, verification by reputable institutions, and transparency in audits, can guide organizations in establishing credibility and fostering consumer confidence in their ecolabelling initiatives. Practitioners can leverage these strategies to build consumer trust, increase awareness, and educate consumers about the meaning and significance of environmental labels.

Offering incentives such as discounts, rewards, or exclusive access to ecolabelled products increases the economic appeal of sustainable options.

In conclusion, the research provides valuable contributions to both theory and practice, with a view to effectively improving the impact of ecolabelling on Generation Z's purchasing decisions, driving them towards more sustainable choices.

It enriches theoretical understanding of Generation Z's perception of environmental labels and their influence on purchasing decisions.

Companies should also understand what is important to Generation Z and tailor their offerings to its needs and preferences, especially in the area of eco-friendly products; they can attract Generation Z by collaborating with proenvironmental organizations, which can help build a positive brand image and increase customer engagement in proenvironmental actions. Moreover, this approach offers actionable insights for practitioners to improve label design, communication strategies, and trust-building efforts, ultimately promoting more informed and sustainable consumer choices.

7. Conclusions

7.1. Limitations

A focus group study can provide valuable insights into Generation Z's perception of ecolabelling in purchasing decisions in Italy and Poland. However, limitations also need to be considered when referring to the adopted methodology.

FGIs typically involve a small number of participants, which may not be representative of the entire Generation Z population; therefore, the views expressed might not capture the diversity of opinions within the whole age group. A social desirability bias can also be envisaged, since participants may express views that they believe align with social norms or see as socially desirable, rather than their true beliefs. This can lead to biased or superficial responses regarding the investigated topic (environmental labelling).

Findings from an FGIs in Italy and Poland might not be applicable to Generation Z in other countries or cultures due to cultural, socioeconomic, and contextual differences. Furthermore, cultural differences between Italy and Poland might influence participants' perceptions of ecolabelling. Translating the study's findings between languages might also introduce nuances or misinterpretations.

Participants' pre-existing knowledge and attitudes towards ecolabelling might influence their responses, leading to biased outcomes.

Even if the moderators adopted neutral behaviours, their skill in facilitating discussions may have impacted the depth and quality of data collected. Bias in moderation might involuntarily guide participants' responses.

Finally, while FGIs provide rich qualitative insights, they might not offer detailed quantitative data, making it difficult to measure the extent of attitudes or behaviours.

Contrary to what usually happens in FGIs, fortunately, in all the focus group sessions, both in Italy and in Poland, there were no "dominant participants" who could have influenced the results by steering the discussion, impacting the responses of more reserved participants, and even potentially causing them to be reluctant in expressing their own opinions; no lack of in-depth responses can be referred to as participants had the possibility to fully express their opinions, and the topics (even if complex) were analysed in depth.

7.2. Future Research

The results of this study could be linked to the idea that consumer choices have the potential to play a substantial role in mitigating the adverse effects on the environment.

The conclusions reached through this analysis offer a comprehensive perspective as they merge insights gathered from a society characterized by heightened environmental awareness and knowledge (Italy), capturing the demands and viewpoints concerning the significance of environmental labelling. Simultaneously, these conclusions are juxtaposed with the challenges and obstacles observed in nations embarking on the journey of sustainable development, as exemplified by Poland.

This research certainly sets foundations for further investigation by FGIs also in other EU Member States, to the scope of broadening the range of analysis on environmental label perception in the purchase phase. It would also be interesting to verify whether this aspect displays diversified impacts on different consumer typologies, according to income and/or age groups.

Moreover, in order to tackle the constraints associated with the challenge of quantifying the breadth of consumer attitudes or behaviours, in future research, FGIs may be complemented with other research methods, such as surveys or in-depth interviews, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Generation Z's perception of ecolabelling in purchasing decisions across different cultural contexts.

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