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THE GENERATORS OF GENERATION Z'S POSITIVE WOM IN THE ORGANIC FOOD MARKET

Abstract: The global purchase of organic food products has risen significantly over the past two decades, reflecting a shift in consumer behavior towards more sustainable practices. Marketing researchers have consistently examined the factors influencing these purchasing decisions, including the role of consumer recommendations. However, a review of both domestic and international literature reveals a significant research gap, particularly regarding Generation Z, a demographic poised to become a crucial segment in the food market. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the positive word-of-mouth (WOM) of Generation Z specifically in the context of the organic food market. While existing studies predominantly focus on the impact of WOM on purchasing decisions, there remains a lack of exploration into the generators behind such WOM. Accordingly, this research aims to identify the variables correlated with Generation Z's positive WOM in the organic food market. The empirical research was conducted in the Republic of Serbia, utilizing a sample size of 810 respondents. Research hypotheses were tested using the statistical software platform IBM SPSS Statistics, applying Pearson's correlation test. The findings indicate that all hypothesized variables (Health Consciousness, Ethical and Environmental Dimensions, Personal Attitude, and Subjective Norms) are statistically significant and positively correlated with Generation Z's positive WOM in the organic food market. Notably, the strongest correlation was found with the Ethical and Environmental Dimension, highlighting consumers' sense of obligation to choose organic food products. These results suggest that Generation Z's motivations for promoting organic food are deeply rooted in their values and awareness of ethical and environmental issues.

Keywords: Generation Z, recommendations, word-of-mouth, consumer behavior, organic food.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, there has been a notable increase in the purchasing of organic food products, reflecting a shift in consumer behavior toward more sustainable practices. During this time, marketing researchers have focused on identifying the factors that influence environmentally conscious behavior (Albayrak et al., 2013). As consumers increasingly seek sustainable options, they often turn to their social circles for information and recommendations before

making a purchase (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020). Consequently, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has emerged as a crucial element in the organic food market.

Despite the growing interest in positive WOM, a review of both domestic and international literature reveals a significant research gap, particularly regarding Generation Z. This cohort, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is on the brink of becoming influential household decision-makers, shaping the future of consumer behavior and family dynamics. Understanding their preferences is essential for organizations operating in a competitive market (Sjahrudin & Adif, 2024). Therefore, the subject of this study is positive word-of-mouth within Generation Z, with a specific emphasis on the organic food sector.

While existing studies predominantly focus on the impact of WOM on purchasing decisions, there remains a lack of exploration into the generators behind such WOM. Accordingly, this research aims to identify the variables correlated with Generation Z's positive WOM in the organic food market. Among the proposed variables are Health Consciousness, Ethical and Environmental Dimensions, Personal Attitude, and Subjective Norms. To sustain the growing demand for organic food, it is essential to understand the factors that may contribute to it (Hugar & Shivappa, 2021).

The paper contributes to a better understanding of young consumers' behaviors and addresses the identified research gap in marketing literature. It offers valuable insights into the positive WOM system, identifying the variables that motivate consumers to recommend organic food products to their peers. Marketing professionals can leverage these findings to develop their promotional strategies, drawing in new customers while empowering existing ones to act as "agents" of the company (Boyer et al., 2015).

The introduction section of this paper outlines the subject, objective, and its contribution. Following the introduction, a systematic review of both domestic and international literature is presented. This review provides a theoretical framework for the empirical research that follows. It consists of two parts: the first part focuses on organic food products and the WOM communication system, while the second part focuses on the characteristics of Generation Z. The methodology, results, and discussions on the author's empirical research are then presented, culminating in a concluding section that outlines the study's limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Almli et al. (2019), the European organic sector is among the fastest-growing food markets currently. Hugar and Shivappa (2021) attribute this rising demand to a sustainable consumption trend, which is influenced by increasing environmental issues such as global warming and natural disasters (Rengalakshmi et al., 2024).

The term "organic" refers to the cultivation and processing methods of agricultural products (Sharma & Singla, 2019). These methods avoid harmful inputs and promote economic, social, and ecological benefits (Smoluk-Sikorska et al., 2023). Hence, organic farming is positioned as a way to protect the environment, as these products are free from harmful substances (Hossain et al., 2019).

Although it has many advantages, this production method is often associated with higher costs, leading to elevated prices compared to conventional products (Konuk, 2019). Consequently, willingness-to-pay for organic food (WTP) has become an increasingly popular research topic. Smoluk-Sikorska et al. (2023) describe WTP as the maximum price consumers are ready to pay for a specific product.

Nonetheless, WTP does not guarantee that consumers will purchase organic food. Research by Li and Jaharuddin (2021) highlights the gap between intention and actual purchase behavior. Their study revealed that the relationship between consumers' purchase intention and purchase decision on organic food could be enhanced by the moderating effect of word-of-mouth (WOM).

WOM represents a significant form of communication (Amin, 2019), occurring between consumers and others outside an organization, such as friends and family (Ghassani et al., 2022). This type of communication is perceived as highly credible (Konuk, 2019), as consumers tend to trust informal recommendations more than paid advertising sources (Pandey & Khare, 2017).

According to Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat (2020), WOM is a powerful factor in the decision-making process for organic food purchases. Moreover, Ghassani et al. (2022) affirm that consumers are more likely to buy sustainable products when relying on recommendations from their social circles. As such, recommendations play a vital role in shaping consumer behavior (Mouloudj & Bouarar, 2021).

Understanding the factors influencing consumer behavior in the organic food market is essential for maintaining stable demand (Wang et al., 2023), particularly in developing countries (Iqbal et al., 2021). One of the initial challenges in this consumer behavior analysis is the identification of green consumers (Mouloudj & Bouarar, 2021). A literature review shows a research gap, predominantly focusing on Generation Y (Millennials), while there is a limited exploration of Generation Z in the organic food sphere (Vehapi & Mitić, 2021). This cohort, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is becoming increasingly significant in the market (Sjahrudin & Adif, 2024). As this generation matures into a substantial demographic force, understanding their unique values and motivations related to organic food becomes critical.

In comparison to older generations, Jakubowska et al. (2024) note that younger consumers tend to demonstrate higher impulsivity in decision-making. However, Kymäläinen et al. (2021) observe that younger consumers frequently rely on technology. Additionally, Aydemir et al. (2023) highlight that Generation Z members prefer visually appealing foods, especially those trending on social media. Accordingly, the authors suggest that future research should also investigate Generation Z's positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) within the organic food market. Traditional WOM evolved into its electronic version as the internet opened new opportunities for consumers (Amin, 2019). eWOM has increasingly become a vital component of marketing strategies (Sharma & Singla, 2019), enabling consumers to share their experiences without the limitations of social, temporal, or spatial constraints (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020). Thus, future research should explore the positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) generated by Generation Z concerning the organic food market.

3. METHODOLOGY

The online questionnaire was conducted with 810 members of Generation Z in the Republic of Serbia (Subotica, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Vranje) in October 2024. Among the respondents, 633 (78.1%) were female, while 177 (21.9%) were male. A significant portion, 555 (68.5%) reported living in a city, 162 (20%) in a village, and 93 (11.5%) in a suburban area. In terms of living arrangements, 139 (17.2%) of the participants lived in a student dormitory, 171 (21.1%) lived independently, 133 (16.4%) shared a space with a roommate, and 345 (42.6%) resided with their parents. The "other" category was selected by 22 respondents (2.7%). The most common age among these Generation Z members was 20, reflecting the predominance of university students within the sample. The sample was convenient, allowing straightforward access and effective application in the research process. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, each designed to gather specific information and insights. The first section gathered information about respondents' socio-demographic backgrounds and purchasing habits regarding organic food. The second section included 16 constructs in which respondents rated their level of agreement on a Likert scale across 98 statements (ranging from a score of 1, representing strong disagreement, to a score of 5, representing strong agreement). Following a thorough review of both domestic and international literature, five key constructs were determined to be significant for this research, which is presented in Table 1: Health Consciousness, Ethical and Environmental Dimensions, Personal Attitude, Subjective Norms, and WOM.

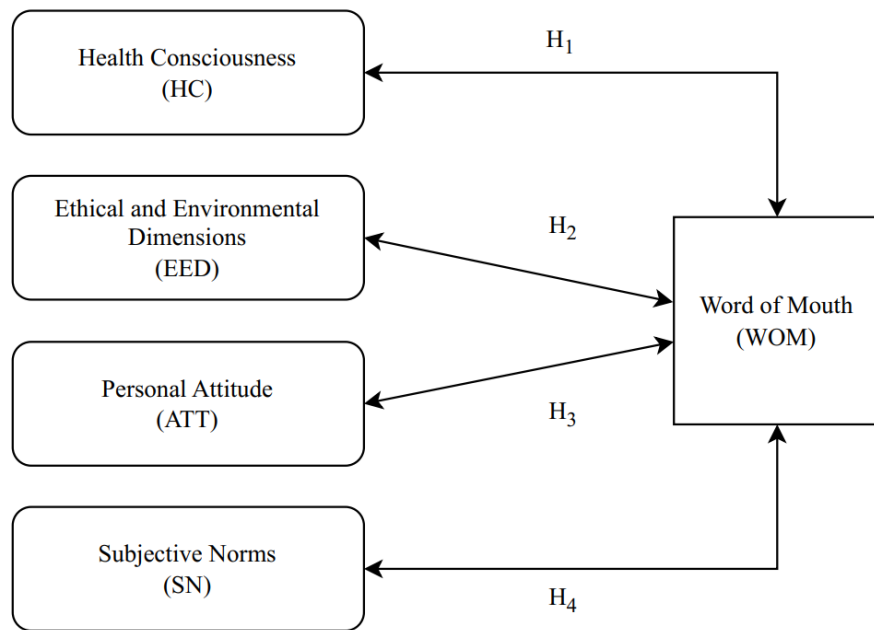
Table 1: Survey items significant for the paper

Survey items:		
HC3	Health Consciousness	Organic food is known for its health benefits.
HC10		I believe that it is safer to consume organic compared to conventional food products.
EED3	Ethical and Environmental Dimensions	Organic food products are environmentally friendly.
EED5		I feel ethically obligated to choose organic food products.
ATT7	Personal Attitude	Organic food is "trending".
SN10	Subjective Norms	I often buy food with my family.
WOM2	Word of Mouth	If someone is searching for healthy and tasty food, I will advise them to buy organic products.
WOM3		I have recommended organic food to my social circle.

Source: The authors' research

A research framework was created to identify the variables correlated with Generation Z's positive WOM in the organic food market.

Illustration 1: Research framework 1



Source: The authors' research

Based on the created research framework, the following hypotheses were set with the aim of testing them:

- H₁ – Health consciousness is positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.
- H₂ – Ethical and environmental dimensions are positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.
- H₃ – Personal attitude is positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.
- H₄ – Subjective norms are positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.

The hypotheses were tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics software platform, and the research results and discussion are presented in the following sections of the paper.

4. RESULTS

Given the nature of the research variables, the proposed hypotheses were tested using Pearson's correlation test to determine if there is a statistically significant correlation between them.

Table 2 shows the correlation between HC, EED, ATT, SN, and WOM2 (survey item: "If someone is searching for healthy and tasty food, I will advise them to buy organic products.").

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation test results

WOM2				
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	N	Correlation
HC3	.243**	.000	810	Positive Significant correlation between variables
HC10	.254**			
EED3	.230**	.000	810	
EED5	.443**			
ATT7	.193**	.000	810	
SN10	.209**	.000	810	
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: The authors' research

Table 3 shows the correlation between HC, EED, ATT, SN, and WOM3 (survey item: "I have recommended organic food to my social circle.").

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation test results

WOM3				
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	N	Correlation
HC3	.220**	.000	810	Positive Significant correlation between variables
HC10	.229**			
EED3	.242**	.000	810	
EED5	.479**			
ATT7	.163**	.000	810	
SN10	.227**	.000	810	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Source: The authors' research

All the variables analyzed in this study have statistically significant relationships, as indicated by a p-value of .000, which is well below the significance threshold of $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

The intensity of these relationships is generally low, within the range of 0.1 - 0.3 (coefficient *r*), with one notable exception: the relationship between Ethical and Environmental Dimensions (EED5) and WOM, which shows medium intensity, ranging from 0.3 - 0.5 (coefficient *r*). This suggests that the ethical obligation felt by consumers to select organic food products correlates most strongly with Generation Z's propensity for positive word-of-mouth in this market.

The positive correlation indicates that an increase in one variable correlates with an increase in another. For instance, heightened health consciousness among consumers is likely to result in a greater willingness to share recommendations. Based on the research findings, the previously established hypotheses *H*₁, *H*₂, *H*₃, and *H*₄ have been confirmed:

- *H*₁ – Health consciousness is positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.
- *H*₂ – Ethical and environmental dimensions are positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.
- *H*₃ – Personal attitude is positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.
- *H*₄ – Subjective norms are positively and statistically significantly correlated with word-of-mouth.

All identified variables correlate positively and statistically significantly with Generation Z's positive WOM regarding organic food products. The strongest correlation is linked to the EED5 dimension, suggesting that consumers with a strong ethical commitment are more likely to recommend organic food products. While the correlation for health-conscious consumers is lower, they also frequently share positive experiences. Additionally, subjective norms and personal attitudes emerge as important factors in facilitating positive word-of-mouth within this demographic.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The concept of green marketing has become increasingly important due to various environmental challenges that modern society faces (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020). One of the key objectives of this marketing approach is to promote the consumption of organic food products (Bryla, 2016). In line with that, Aydemir et al. (2023) highlights the importance of understanding consumer behavior in the food market, especially among Generation Z.

Research conducted by Vehapi and Dolicanin (2016) explored consumer behavior in the Republic of Serbia's organic food market. Their study examined consumer behavior through the lens of marketing mix instruments: product, price, marketing communication (promotion), and distribution channels (place). Findings from their research suggest that organic food producers and marketers should focus on the word-of-mouth (WOM) communication system as well as online communication channels. While existing studies predominantly focus on the impact of WOM on purchasing decisions, there remains a lack of exploration into the generators behind such WOM. The literature on consumer motivation is still lacking, and psychological elements' moderating influence has not received enough attention (Chen & Chen, 2021).

Therefore, this paper aims to fill the identified research gap in marketing literature and enhance the understanding of young consumers' behaviors. It identifies the variables that encourage consumers to recommend organic food products

within their circles, providing valuable insights into the positive WOM system. Marketing experts can leverage these findings to develop suitable promotional strategies that not only attract new customers but also empower existing ones to act as brand ambassadors (Boyer et al., 2015).

An online questionnaire was completed by 810 Generation Z members in the Republic of Serbia for this study. A review of both domestic and international literature identified five constructs as significant for the research: Health Consciousness, Ethical and Environmental Dimensions, Personal Attitude, Subjective Norms, and WOM. The aim was to identify the factors correlated with Generation Z's positive WOM in the organic food sector. The hypotheses were tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics software platform, applying Pearson's correlation test to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between them. Results indicated a positive and statistically significant correlation between all identified variables with Generation Z's positive WOM in the organic food market, with the highest correlation related to EED5 suggesting that consumers with a strong ethical commitment are more likely to recommend organic food products.

One limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on traditional word-of-mouth marketing, whereas the advent of digitalization compels marketers to also examine electronic word-of-mouth systems (Litvin et al., 2006). Future research should explore the positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) generated by Generation Z concerning the organic food market.

Additionally, this study focuses on the post-purchase phase, specifically examining consumers' willingness to recommend organic food. Future research could explore the pre-purchase phase, examining how much consumers trust in recommendations and how significantly those recommendations influence their purchasing decisions.

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