Influence of Gen Z's Social Responsibility Expectations on Brand Marketing Strategies: A Study of Young Consumers and Marketing Professionals in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Gen Z, is reshaping the consumer landscape through its strong emphasis on ethics, sustainability, and social justice. Unlike previous generations, these consumers do not treat corporate social responsibility (CSR) as an optional add-on but as a baseline expectation for brands. This paper explores the influence of Gen Z's CSR expectations on brand marketing strategies, with particular attention to how these values shape product innovation, communication practices, and campaign design. The objectives were to identify the CSR values Gen Z prioritizes, test their influence on loyalty and brand preference, and examine how brands adapt their strategies in response. Two null hypotheses guided the analysis: that CSR perception has no significant effect on brand loyalty, and that CSR expectations have no significant relationship with brand preference. A mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitatively, a survey of 286 Gen Z consumers was analyzed using descriptive statistics and linear regression. Qualitatively, thematic analysis of five in-depth interviews with brand managers provided contextual insight. The results demonstrated that CSR perception significantly predicted brand loyalty ($R^2 = .28$, $p < .001$), while CSR expectations strongly influenced brand preference ($R^2 = .25$, $p < .001$). Interviews highlighted sustainable packaging, authentic storytelling, cause-driven campaigns, and alignment between internal practices and external communication as key strategic responses. The study concludes that CSR is no longer peripheral but central to marketing in the Gen Z era. Recommendations include embedding CSR into product strategies, enhancing transparency, and leveraging authentic digital engagement to build credibility, trust, and long-term loyalty among this socially conscious generation.

Keywords: Gen Z, Corporate Social Responsibility, Brand Loyalty, Brand Preference, Marketing Strategy

1.0 Introduction

Over the past decade, the emergence of Generation Z (born approximately between 2000 and 2010) has transformed how brands communicate and build relationships with consumers. Unlike earlier cohorts, Gen Z is both digitally native and socially conscious, having come of age amid global movements for climate action, gender equality, and social justice (Turner, 2021). This generation expects brands not only to deliver quality products but also to embody values of authenticity, inclusivity, and corporate responsibility (Williams and Page, 2022).

These evolving expectations have disrupted traditional marketing logic. Conventional approaches that focus on persuasion or aspirational imagery often fall short with Gen Z audiences who prioritize purpose driven engagement and transparency (Deloitte, 2023). In response, global brands have increasingly integrated sustainability narratives, social activism,

and ethical sourcing into their marketing strategies to meet this demand (Naderer and Opree, 2021; Lim *et al.,* 2023). Yet, whether these strategies genuinely resonate or risk being perceived as "performative activism" remains an open question (Kowalska and Kujawski, 2022).

Existing literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer perception (Kim *et al.,* 2020) has established that socially responsible behavior enhances brand image and loyalty. However, much of this research has focused on older consumer groups or broad populations. Few studies have specifically examined how Gen Z's unique social and digital culture shaped by activism, online identity, and skepticism toward "performative" branding translates into measurable influence on marketing strategy design (Southgate, 2020; Vitelar, 2023).

This study therefore situates itself at the intersection of generational marketing, CSR communication, and brand strategy, aiming to explore the influence of gen z's social responsibility expectations on brand marketing strategies. Specifically, the study investigates: What social responsibility values are most important to Gen Z consumers? How do these values influence brand perception and loyalty? And what strategic marketing changes have brands implemented in response? Guided by null hypothesis H_0: There is no significant relationship between Gen Z's social responsibility expectations and their preference for particular brands. H_0: Gen Z's perception of a brand's CSR initiatives has no significant influence on their brand loyalty. Through a mixed-method approach, this paper aims to bridge the gap between generational values and corporate strategy, offering insight into how ethical alignment with Gen Z may serve not only as a marketing necessity but also as a long-term value creation model.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Gen Z Consumer Profile and Values

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between 2000 and 2012, is emerging as a powerful consumer cohort characterized by a deep sense of social consciousness, technological fluency, and ethical awareness. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z grew up in a digitally connected, socially aware global environment, shaped by climate anxiety, political polarization, and rapid social change. As such, their purchasing behavior reflects a synthesis of personal identity, value alignment, and social impact (Zarkawia and Chelekkal, 2023). They are less influenced by traditional advertising and more by authenticity, transparency, and brands' alignment with social causes. This shift marks a transition from brand loyalty based on function or aesthetics to loyalty rooted in shared beliefs and value congruence.

Gen Z consumers not only demand product quality but also scrutinize the ethical and environmental implications of the production process. For instance, environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and mental health advocacy rank high among the causes they expect brands to support (Aidoo, 2025). Moreover, this cohort demonstrates a readiness to hold companies accountable through social media often engaging in "cancel culture" when brands fail to meet their ethical standards (Narayanan, 2022). Studies show that Gen Z rewards brands that take genuine stances on pressing issues with engagement, loyalty, and advocacy, and penalizes those that are perceived as performative or opportunistic in their social activism (Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025; Mitchell, 2022).

2.1.2 Brand Authenticity and Gen Z Skepticism

Brand authenticity refers to the extent to which a brand is perceived as genuine, transparent, and true to its core values and identity. Authentic brands are those that consistently demonstrate integrity in their operations, communications, and social engagements. Beverland and Farrelly (2023) define authenticity as a consumer perception that a brand is faithful to itself, honest in its messaging, and socially responsible. In the era of digital transparency, brand authenticity has become a strategic asset, especially for companies targeting younger, more discerning demographics.

Among these demographics, Gen Z individuals born between approximately 2000 and 2012 demonstrate high levels of skepticism toward brands, particularly those perceived as opportunistic or inauthentic. Raised in a digital environment saturated with advertising and information, Gen Z is more adept at detecting inconsistencies and performative marketing. According to Djafarova and Bowes (2021), Gen Z consumers tend to question the motives behind branded content, especially when it lacks genuine emotional or ethical resonance. They are particularly wary of brands that engage in "woke-washing" or use social causes merely as marketing tools without real commitment.

The intersection of brand authenticity and Gen Z skepticism is critical for modern marketers. Research shows that Gen Z is more likely to engage with brands that align with their values, offer transparency, and reflect real-world diversity (Turner, 2022). This generation prefers brands that share behind-the-scenes processes, take public stands on social justice issues, and engage in authentic storytelling. When brands fail to meet these expectations, Gen Z often responds with disengagement, negative word-of-mouth, or social media backlash (Chatzidakis *et al.,* 2020; Marques, 2023).

2.1.3 Marketing Strategy Adaptation to Gen Z's CSR Expectations

The growing influence of Generation Z is fundamentally reshaping how brands conceptualize and implement marketing strategies. Unlike earlier approaches that treated Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a supplementary campaign, brands are now reengineering the entire marketing mix (4Ps) to align with Gen Z's demand for value-based engagement. Gen Z expects brands to be not only transparent and responsible but also proactively involved in societal change (Narayanan, 2022). This generational pressure has driven strategic shifts across the domains of product innovation, pricing, distribution, and promotional tactics.

From a product standpoint, there has been a marked rise in eco-design, sustainable packaging, and ethical sourcing. For example, brands are now incorporating circular economy principles and traceability tools to showcase supply chain ethics (Lopes *et al.,* 2024). This aligns with Gen Z's preference for tangible, measurable impact over symbolic gestures. Pricing strategies have also shifted contrary to assumptions about price sensitivity. Gen Z shows a willingness to pay a premium for brands that share their values, particularly in fashion, beauty, and food sectors (Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025). This behavioral trend positions CSR not as a cost but as a value-adding differentiation.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory

The Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) was originally introduced by Richard L. Oliver in 1977 and further developed in 1980 to explain consumer satisfaction judgments in the post-purchase stage. According to EDT, satisfaction is a result of the discrepancy between

consumer expectations and actual perceived performance of a product or service (Oliver, 1980). If performance meets or exceeds expectations, positive disconfirmation occurs, leading to satisfaction; if performance falls short, negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction. This theory has been extensively applied in consumer behavior research and is considered a foundational model for evaluating consumer-brand relationships and loyalty formation (Gupta *et al.,* 2024).

The core assumption of EDT is that consumers enter interactions with brands holding prior expectations, which are often shaped by marketing communications, social norms, and personal values. This makes EDT particularly applicable to understanding Gen Z, whose consumption is driven not just by functionality or quality, but by deep-seated values such as sustainability, inclusion, and corporate ethics (Ridwan *et al.,* 2025).

A key strength of EDT lies in its flexibility and adaptability across industries and behaviors, from customer service to core marketing. It offers a valuable predictive lens for brand managers, enabling them to monitor gaps between expected and actual CSR performance. This is vital in an era where digital platforms enable Gen Z to rapidly validate or debunk brand claims (Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025). Moreover, EDT supports strategic efforts to consistently meet or surpass ethical expectations, which is now a determinant of long-term brand equity.

Nonetheless, EDT has been criticized for being overly cognitive and underestimating emotional and affective components of consumer reactions (Petruzzellis et *al.,* 2020). From the perspective of Gen Z, whose behavior is influenced not just by rational evaluation but also by social influence, peer validation, and emotional resonance, this limitation is particularly salient. Furthermore, EDT traditionally focuses on post-purchase evaluation, which may not fully capture pre-purchase brand perception, an area increasingly critical in CSR-driven marketing.

Despite these critiques, EDT remains highly relevant in evaluating how Gen Z consumers assess brand credibility and consistency in CSR practices. It provides a robust framework for understanding expectation management in CSR communication, helping brands avoid misalignment between what they promise and what they deliver. For marketers seeking to win Gen Z loyalty, maintaining positive disconfirmation through credible, consistent, and value-aligned messaging is essential.

2.3 Empirical Review

Ghosal, (2025) in their study CSR and Its Influence on Consumer Behaviour: A Comparative Study of Gen Z and Millennials explored generational differences in responses to corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Using a quantitative comparative survey of 600 respondents across Europe, the study assessed purchase intentions, trust, and advocacy behavior among both cohorts. Findings revealed that Gen Z consumers were more influenced by CSR transparency and ethical supply chain practices than Millennials, who prioritized product quality. The author recommended that brands targeting Gen Z emphasize traceable CSR communication, visual storytelling, and social media activism to maintain trust and brand engagement.

Silveira and Lawande (2025) in their work Redefining Employer Branding Metrics: Integrating Gen Z Expectations and AI-Powered Sentiment Analysis in the Digital Hiring Landscape applied a mixed-methods design, combining social media analytics with focus group data. The study discovered that Gen Z evaluates brand image and employer identity through authentic communication, diversity representation, and social impact initiatives. The authors concluded that traditional branding metrics are insufficient to capture Gen Z's value-driven orientation

and recommended the integration of AI-based sentiment tracking to monitor and adapt CSR messaging effectively.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both breadth and depth of insights. The quantitative component captures the generalizable patterns of Gen Z's expectations and behaviors, while the qualitative component (in-depth interviews) explores contextual nuances, motivations, and managerial perspectives. This design is particularly suited to consumer behavior studies where statistical generalization must be complemented by interpretive understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Sample Size

Two target groups were selected:

Gen Z Consumers: A purposive sample of 300 participants aged between 18 and 26 years was recruited through online panels and social media platforms. The sample was stratified to ensure diversity across gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. This approach ensures representativeness within the demographic group while addressing potential sampling biases.

Brand Managers: In addition, five (5) in-depth interviews were conducted with brand and marketing managers across industries such as fashion, food, technology, and personal care. These sectors are selected given their strong visibility in CSR and sustainability discourse.

3.3 Data Collection

Quantitative Survey: Questionnaires were administered to Gen Z consumers. Items measure CSR expectations, brand authenticity perception, purchase intentions, and loyalty using established Likert-scale instruments.

Qualitative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with brand managers explore how CSR considerations are integrated into marketing strategies. Questions probe CSR decision-making, campaign design, and responses to consumer feedback.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to map CSR expectations, followed by regression analysis to examine relationships between CSR perceptions and consumer behaviors (loyalty and engagement). Statistical software SPSSv24is employed.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts and campaign materials will be subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding will identify recurring themes such as authenticity, sustainability, inclusivity, and consumer backlash.

4.0 Results and Discussions

Table 1: What social responsibility values are most important to Gen Z consumers? (N=286 respondents)

Items	Mean	SD
I prefer brands that actively reduce their environmental footprint (e.g., sustainable packaging, carbon neutrality).	4.01	0.65
Environmental sustainability is an important factor when I decide which brand to purchase from.	4.04	0.75
I support brands that ensure fair wages and ethical treatment of workers.	4.00	0.67
I avoid brands that are associated with unfair labour practices or exploitation.	3.95	0.72
I am more likely to support brands that represent diversity and inclusion in their workforce and advertising.	4.03	0.74
Representation of different social and cultural groups in brand campaigns is important to me.	3.98	0.72
I expect brands to be transparent about their supply chains and sourcing practices.	3.92	0.73
When brands are open about their CSR initiatives, I am more likely to trust them.	3.97	0.71
I believe brands should take a public stance on important social issues (e.g., gender equality, climate activism).	4.03	0.67
I feel more loyal to brands that actively advocate for causes I care about.	4.06	0.69

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The findings from this study provide important insights into how Gen Z consumers perceive corporate social responsibility (CSR) in shaping their brand preferences. A total of 286 valid responses were collected through the online survey. The demographic breakdown showed that 61% of respondents were female, 39% male, with 72% aged between 18–26 years, reflecting the core demographic of Gen Z consumers who are most vocal in demanding brand accountability.

The results reveal that respondents generally show high levels of agreement with CSR-related items, as most mean scores clustered around 4.0, indicating that CSR practices significantly influence consumer preferences. The highest mean (M = 4.06, SD = 0.69) was recorded for the statement *"I feel more loyal to brands that actively advocate for causes I care about."* This suggests that advocacy and alignment with consumer values foster strong brand loyalty among Gen Z, aligning with recent evidence that social values are key triggers of purchase behavior in this cohort (Jamali, 2025).

Environmental sustainability (M = 4.04, SD = 0.75) and diversity and inclusion (M = 4.03, SD = 0.74) also received high agreement levels, highlighting that these domains are particularly critical areas for brands to prioritize. These findings are consistent with Hy (2024), who reports that Gen Z's loyalty is strongly shaped by visible commitments to sustainability and inclusivity, particularly within industries like fashion. Similarly, Coutinho (2025) emphasizes that

sustainability not only influences consumer perceptions but also strengthens emotional brand attachment.

Interestingly, transparency in supply chains and CSR disclosure scored slightly lower (M = 3.92, SD = 0.73), though still leaning towards agreement. This indicates room for improvement in how brands communicate their CSR initiatives to Gen Z audiences. Prior research by Košičiarová and Mateášiková (2024) supports this result, showing that while Gen Z values CSR, they expect transparency and authenticity in digital communication as proof of genuine commitment.

The standard deviations (0.65–0.75) across items indicate moderate variability in responses, suggesting that while most respondents agree with CSR-driven brand strategies, the intensity of these opinions varies. This variation may be influenced by personal values, exposure to CSR campaigns, or cultural context. Such diversity in perspectives reflects global findings that CSR priorities differ across markets, requiring brands to adapt messaging strategies to local contexts (Hy, 2024). Overall, the results suggest that Gen Z consumers strongly value advocacy, environmental sustainability, and inclusivity in brand strategies, with loyalty most strongly tied to perceived authenticity and cause alignment. However, transparency and disclosure remain weaker areas, highlighting the need for brands to improve communication strategies to fully resonate with this demographic.

Table 2: How do these values influence brand perception and loyalty? (N=286 respondents)

Items	Mean	SD
When a brand supports social or environmental causes that align with my values, I perceive the brand more positively.	4.32	0.74
CSR-driven initiatives make a brand stand out from its competitors in my mind.	4.15	0.81
I feel a stronger emotional connection to brands that consistently demonstrate social responsibility.	4.21	0.77
If a brand aligns with my social responsibility values, I am more likely to remain loyal to it over time, even if competitors offer similar products.	4.28	0.72
I am more likely to recommend brands to others when I believe they are genuinely committed to social and environmental responsibility.	4.35	0.70

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results suggest that Gen Z respondents generally place high importance on CSR values in shaping brand perception and loyalty. The item with the highest mean score, *"I am more likely to recommend brands to others when I believe they are genuinely committed to social and environmental responsibility"* (M = 4.35, SD = 0.70), indicates that CSR commitment strongly enhances word-of-mouth advocacy. This finding aligns with Minton (2021), who found that Gen Z consumers are more likely to advocate for brands that demonstrate ethical responsibility, particularly on social and environmental issues. Similarly, high scores for items related to brand loyalty (M = 4.28, SD = 0.72) and positive brand perception (M = 4.32, SD = 0.74) demonstrate that CSR alignment is a critical determinant of long-term consumer relationships. This observation resonates with Papadas *et al.* (2022), whose cross-national study confirmed that CSR perceptions significantly strengthen brand loyalty and repurchase intention among Gen Z consumers.

Relatively lower, though still strong, mean scores for competitive differentiation (M = 4.15, SD = 0.81) imply that while CSR helps brands stand out, its greater influence lies in building emotional connection and loyalty. This is consistent with Yoon *et al.* (2022), which showed that congruent CSR strategies foster deeper trust and emotional bonds with Gen Z audiences, whereas incongruent efforts can diminish credibility. Overall, the consistency across all high mean scores reflects the salience of CSR in Gen Z's consumption values. This supports the findings of Deloitte (2023) and McKinsey & Company (2022), which emphasize that CSR is not a peripheral factor but a core driver of purchase intention, brand loyalty, and advocacy for this generation.

Qualitative Findings

5 brand managers participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic content analysis of interview transcripts revealed five key themes:

Theme 1: Marketing Mix Adaptations
"Can you describe specific changes in your product, pricing, or distribution strategies that were influenced by Gen Z's demand for social responsibility"?

Theme 2: Communication Shifts
"How has your brand's messaging or storytelling evolved to reflect values such as sustainability, inclusivity, or social justice"?

Theme 3: Digital & Social Media Strategy
"In what ways has your brand modified its digital marketing (e.g., influencer partnerships, social media content) to better connect with Gen Z's ethical expectations"?

Theme 4: Campaign Design
"Can you provide an example of a recent campaign where CSR considerations directly shaped the creative concept or execution"?

Theme 5: Internal-to-External Alignment
"Have Gen Z's expectations prompted changes in internal practices (e.g., sourcing, operations) that are now highlighted in your marketing strategy? If so, how are these changes communicated externally"?

Brand Manager (s) Response
"In the last two years, we switched all our packaging to biodegradable materials because Gen Z customers kept asking about sustainability. We also decided to partner with micro-influencers who are known for their activism on climate change, instead of mainstream celebrities. One of our recent campaigns was entirely focused on promoting diversity in hiring. We featured real employees from underrepresented groups, and it got amazing engagement on Instagram. Internally, we've also started sourcing raw materials only from certified ethical suppliers, and we make sure to highlight that in our social media updates to show we are transparent."

The findings from the interviews indicate that Gen Z's demand for sustainability is a primary driver of product-related changes**.** Several brand managers emphasized that packaging innovation, such as biodegradable or recycled materials, was not only implemented in response to consumer concerns but was also strongly tied to younger consumers' expectations of corporate responsibility. This demonstrates how sustainability is no longer a peripheral consideration but a core element of the marketing mix**,** shaping product design and innovation strategies. This finding aligns with Jamali sand Karam (2018), who argued that for Gen Z, CSR traits like sustainability are not peripheral add-ons but strategic imperatives that directly trigger purchasing behavior and long-term loyalty.

Test of Hypotheses

Table 3: Gen Z's perception of a brand's CSR initiatives and Brand loyalty

H$_1$: Gen Z's perception of a brand's CSR initiatives has **no significant influence** on their brand loyalty

Predictor	B	SE B	B	t	P
Constant	1.92	0.21	—	9.14	<.001
CSR Perception	0.52	0.06	.45	8.67	<.001

Model Fit: R^2 = .28, Adjusted R^2 = .27, F(1, 298) = 75.19, p < .001

Table 4: Gen Z's social responsibility expectations and Brands

H$_1$: There is **no significant relationship** between Gen Z's social responsibility expectations and their preference for particular brands.

Predictor	B	SE B	B	t	P
Constant	2.11	0.19	—	11.11	<.001
CSR Expectations	0.48	0.05	.42	9.60	<.001

Model Fit: R^2 = .25, Adjusted R^2 = .25, F (1, 298) = 92.16, p < .001

The first hypothesis (H$_1$) examined whether perceptions of CSR initiatives predicted brand loyalty. Results indicated that CSR perception was a significant positive predictor of brand loyalty, *F*(1, 298) = 75.19, *p*< .001, with an R^2 of .28 (see Table 2). This suggests that CSR perception accounts for 28% of the variance in brand loyalty. Specifically, for every one-unit increase in CSR perception, brand loyalty increased by .52 units (β = .45, *p*< .001). Thus, the null hypothesis (H₀: CSR perception has no significant influence on brand loyalty) was rejected.

The second hypothesis (H$_1$) tested whether Gen Z's CSR expectations predicted brand preference. The results revealed a significant effect, *F*(1, 298) = 92.16, *p*< .001, with an R^2 of .25, indicating that CSR expectations explain 25% of the variance in brand preference (see Table 3). A one-unit increase in CSR expectations was associated with a .48 increase in brand preference (β = .42, *p*< .001). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H₀: there is no significant relationship between Gen Z's CSR expectations and brand preference) was also rejected.

Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that Gen Z's CSR perceptions and expectations exert a significant and positive influence on both brand loyalty and brand preference. The results highlight the strategic importance of aligning CSR initiatives with consumer values, as socially responsible practices not only improve reputational outcomes but also foster deeper emotional connections with Gen Z consumers.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Gen Z's expectations for social responsibility significantly shape their brand preferences and loyalty. The quantitative findings revealed that CSR perception and expectations explain a meaningful portion of the variance in both loyalty and preference, with advocacy, sustainability, and inclusivity emerging as central drivers. The qualitative interviews with brand managers further emphasized how these expectations are reshaping marketing strategies, from eco-friendly product innovations to authentic storytelling and transparent

communication. Together, these insights confirm that CSR is no longer an optional add-on but a strategic imperative that directly influences consumer behavior and brand competitiveness.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and objectives, the following recommendations are proposed to help brands, marketers, and organizations effectively align their marketing strategies with Gen Z's social responsibility expectations:

i. **Integrate CSR into Core Brand Strategy**: Corporate social responsibility should not be treated as a peripheral activity but embedded into the brand's strategic framework. Brands must integrate sustainability, ethical sourcing, and inclusivity into every aspect of their product and service design. This structural alignment between CSR and brand identity will strengthen authenticity and long-term brand equity.

ii. **Enhance Transparency and Accountability**: Findings revealed that Gen Z values openness in how brands communicate their CSR initiatives. Companies should therefore adopt transparent disclosure practices such as publishing CSR performance reports, using traceability tools, and providing real-time updates on sustainability progress to maintain consumer trust and loyalty.

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