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# Communicating sport, sustainability and social activism to generation Z: consumer perceptions

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**Objective:** This study aimed to identify how selected representatives of Generation Z, specifically university students, perceive Adidas marketing campaigns. The research sought to explore their perceptions, considering various aspects of the campaigns such as target audiences, media used, and messaging, in the context of Generation Z's unique values and consumer behavior. Furthermore, the study investigated the alignment of these campaigns with the values characterizing Generation Z and the effectiveness of different communication strategies employed by Adidas.

**Methods:** A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The quantitative phase involved an online questionnaire distributed to Generation Z students. The questionnaire assessed awareness of specific Adidas campaigns (e.g., Parley for the Oceans, Love Unites, Sportswear), emotional responses, agreement with campaign-related statements, and purchase likelihood using Likert scales and the Net Promoter Score. The qualitative phase consisted of two focus group discussions, to gain deeper insights into their perceptions and to elaborate on the quantitative findings. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, while descriptive statistics were conducted on the quantitative data.

**Results:** The study generally indicated a moderate level of awareness regarding various Adidas marketing campaigns among the Generation Z student population. Sportspersons were more frequently recognized and perceived as more credible brand ambassadors compared to celebrities and influencers. Campaigns addressing themes of sustainability and diversity generally resonated with the respondents, suggesting an awareness and consideration of these values. However, the study also revealed a notable "paradox of Generation Z," where despite expressing interest in sustainability and ethical considerations, price and practicality often took precedence in stated purchase intentions. Furthermore, there was a general indication of a potential disconnect between the recognition and impact of global Adidas campaigns within the specific context of the Generation Z demographic. Direct communication attempts via mobile applications were largely unnoticed and not preferred. Collaborations with youth sports leagues and the brand's venture into NFTs also showed low levels of awareness among the respondents.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that while Adidas makes efforts to engage with the values of Generation Z in its marketing campaigns, the overall impact and resonance within the student demographic are nuanced. The

findings highlight the importance of focusing on authentic and credible brand ambassadors, particularly from the sports domain. Despite a stated affinity for values such as sustainability and diversity, the economic realities often influence purchase decisions, underscoring the “paradox of Generation Z.” Global brands like Adidas need to carefully consider local market penetration and tailor their communication strategies to enhance recognition and impact among the Generation Z audience.

#### KEYWORDS

marketing campaigns, marketing strategy, consumer behavior, generation Z, Adidas

## Introduction

In the dynamically evolving realm of digital marketing, where consumer demands are in constant flux, a paramount task for companies is to effectively reach and engage diverse demographic segments. Within today’s marketing landscape, Generation Z holds a significant position as a crucial target group for numerous global brands, primarily due to their expanding purchasing power. This generation, typically encompassing individuals born between 1995 and 2010, presents both novel challenges and promising opportunities stemming from their distinct values, preferences, and modes of communication (Seemiller and Grace, 2018; Talmon, 2019; Tirocchi, 2024).

Generation Z stands out as the first generation that has grown up with ubiquitous access to the internet and digital technologies from their early formative years. Consequently, its members are accustomed to the immediate availability of information, continuous interaction with their peers through social networking platforms, and the utilization of mobile devices as indispensable tools for their daily routines (Dolot, 2018; Kannan and Kumar, 2022; Elkatmıř, 2024).

Adidas, a globally recognized leader in the sports apparel and footwear market, actively endeavors to target this specific demographic. The company strives to connect with Generation Z not only through appealing products but also by resonating with their core values and lifestyle. Adidas also focuses its campaigns on crafting authentic narratives grounded in values that are representative of Generation Z.

As brands like Adidas venture into the world of Generation Z, they must adapt to novel communication channels and formats that are characteristic of this cohort (Raslie, 2021). Traditional advertising methods are becoming less effective, while user-generated content and influencer marketing are gaining prominence. This generation exhibits a preference for interactive and visually engaging content that can be easily shared and tailored to their personal interests and values.

Marketing communication aimed at Generation Z is a rapidly evolving field, especially for global sports brands such as Adidas. Although numerous studies have investigated Generation Z’s consumer behavior and attitudes towards marketing (Bezbaruah and Trivedi, 2020; Dragolea et al., 2023; Maziriri et al., 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023; Ngo et al., 2024), most focus on Western markets or treat Generation Z as a homogeneous group (Munsch, 2021). There is a lack of research that specifically analyzes how global sports brands—particularly Adidas—communicate values such as sustainability, diversity, and social activism to Generation Z in the Central Eastern European (CEE region) context. This study seeks to fill this gap by

providing new insights into the perceptions and attitudes towards marketing campaigns.

The aim of this study is to identify how selected representatives of Generation Z, specifically university students, perceive Adidas marketing campaigns. To address this aim, the following research question was formulated: How do Generation Z students perceive Adidas marketing campaigns, particularly those focused on sustainability, diversity, and social activism?

## Literature review

### Generation Z

Generation Z demonstrates a heightened sensitivity towards issues concerning social responsibility and equality within society (Dragolea et al., 2023). These aspects significantly influence the consumer behavior and brand loyalty of Generation Z individuals (Dolot, 2018; Pinto and Paramita, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2023). In the contemporary context, the success of marketing campaigns launched by brands or firms is increasingly contingent on the brand’s ability to project authenticity, transparency, and social responsibility. Due to the scarcity of existing research (Anton, 2024) on the relationship between the Adidas brand and Generation Z consumers, this work offers a valuable analysis of Generation Z as a primary consumer base for Adidas.

Authors (Dolot, 2018; Movahed et al., 2024; Ryan, 2016) defined a generation as an identifiable group sharing birth years, age, location, and the experience of significant life events during critical developmental stages. Categorizing people by age range has become increasingly prevalent, often linked to global and cultural trends, according to Dolot (2018). Shared experiences, life events, and common values are what connect generations (Schewe and Noble, 2000; Hansen and Leuty, 2012). A significant trend of values and shared experiences can link these decisions, leading to conclusions about intergenerational differences and similarities. Strauss and Howe (1991) proposed three factors that can define generations more precisely than age, yet are also related to it, specifically connected to the experiences of members within a certain age group: perceived membership, shared beliefs and behaviors (the striving to find a conceptual anchor for self-understanding (Burge, 2011; Difebrian et al., 2023), and a shared place/situation in history. Töröcsik et al. (2014) suggested that due to increasing life expectancy, five generations may coexist, necessitating the addressing of their shared problems. Conversely, McCrindle and Wolfinger (2009) indicated that up to seven generations might coexist and work together.

Generation Z is a generation unlike any other, representing one of the youngest generations identified. Research by [Wunderman Thompson Intelligence \(2020\)](#) indicated that they currently comprise 32% of the global population with an annual purchasing power of USD 149 billion. Unlike Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) ([Seemiller and Grace, 2018](#)), there are no comparably definitive thresholds delineating later generational boundaries. For analytical purposes, Generation Z is often considered to include those born between 1991 and 2010 ([Fuentes, 2014](#)). Some approaches narrow this range to those born after 1995 ([Seemiller and Grace, 2018](#)) or 1996 ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#)). [Töröcsik et al. \(2014\)](#) highlighted the difficulty of generalization due to the relatively high diversity in lifestyles, motivations, and habits within Generation Z, a phenomenon also observed in other generations as they become more “homogeneous” and characteristic over time. Today’s youth can be better described by scenes rather than larger groupings. Members of Generation Z are often described as “digitally connected,” “communicating,” “content-focused,” “community-oriented,” and “changing” ([Singh and Dangmei, 2016](#); [Dolot, 2018](#)). However, [Wilson \(2021\)](#) and [Jayatissa \(2023\)](#), suggested that Generation Z is appropriately named after the last letter of the alphabet because their arrival signifies the end of clearly defined roles, traditions, and experiences. After all, Generation Z is coming of age amidst the repercussions of the most disruptive decade of the last century. [McCrindle and Wolfinger \(2009\)](#) and [Gabrielova and Buchko \(2021\)](#) outlined several defining characteristics of Generation Z: Extended Childhood, Generational Definedness, Digital Integration, Global Focus, Visual Engagement, Educational Reform and Social Definedness.

Members of Generation Z are aware of the world around them. They are very mature regarding political issues and highly engaged in environmental and social topics, making them demanding consumers ([Montgomery, 2009](#); [Andersen et al., 2021](#); [Dwidienawati et al., 2021](#)). Generation Z begins puberty 3 months earlier than previous generations, potentially due to the fast-paced world – the internet – or increased pressure from parents who are often preoccupied ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#)). One of the reasons for excessive parental concern may be the fertility issues faced by Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1979) ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#)). Their obsession with safety is partly due to the difficult times experienced by both Generation X and Z during their formative years ([Smeak, 2020](#); [Vieira et al., 2020](#)). The majority of Generation Z consider their parents their best friends. Generation X raised their offspring to be realistic and placed a strong emphasis on individuality ([Krahn and Galambos, 2014](#); [Twenge, 2023](#)). Having lived through the 2008 economic recession and observing their parents and friends cope with its effects, Generation Z is focused on protecting their money and is financially literate.

Parents place a strong emphasis on education, task completion, and extracurricular activities ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#)). This is one of the possible reasons why Generation Z is one of the most educated generations ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#); [Dolot, 2018](#)). However, Generation Z no longer perceives teachers as a source of information but rather as facilitators of learning experiences. Educational institutions are at the intersection of three generations: Generation X as parents, Generation Y (those born between 1981 and 1996) ([Dimock, 2019](#)) as teachers, and Generation Z as students. Given the specificity of Generation Z, it is appropriate to adapt the

education system to them. This generation no longer responds to a passive communication model but needs visual and interactive communication with quick and easy access to information ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#)). Generation Z is also very practical – they focus more on how to find, interpret, and use information than on mere memorization ([Montgomery, 2009](#); [Twenge, 2023](#)).

Representatives of Generation Z will go through an average of 17 jobs and 5 different careers in their lifetime. For Generation Z, benefits and company values are greater motivators than financial compensation and job security. One of the life values represented by Generation Z is work-life balance, the ability to balance work with friends, education, family, sports, or other work. This lifestyle of balancing work and family is particularly important for women, who often seek jobs they can do from home. Generation Z also expects feedback on their work ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#); [Singh and Dangmei, 2016](#); [Dolot, 2018](#)). According to some authors ([Bassiouni and Hackley, 2014](#); [Turner, 2015](#); [Jasrotia et al., 2022](#)), this may be due to playing video games for example, the field of esports, as noted by [Hospodková et al. \(2025a\)](#), where Generation Z members are accustomed to receiving immediate feedback on their performance, which they can use to correct mistakes or generally improve their work. They voluntarily seek change if it means better results. Due to automation and the labor market activity of older adults (retirees, mothers on maternity leave), Generation Z lacks sufficient work experience. 65% of Generation Z members will be employed in jobs that do not currently exist ([Barhate and Dirani, 2021](#); [Autor et al., 2023](#); [Ma and Fang, 2023](#)). Filling out resumes is challenging for Generation Z not only due to a lack of work experience but also due to an inability to identify their strengths and weaknesses, as they do not understand themselves well enough to apply labels ([Drewery et al., 2023](#); [Trifan and Pantea, 2024](#)). Representatives of Generation Z consider self-employment as a possible career path because they believe it is better paid and gives them a sense of independence.

A characteristic trait of Generation Z is multitasking. Its representatives are more focused on speed than accuracy ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#)). According to some researchers ([Janssen and Carradini, 2021](#); [Wang and Park, 2023](#)), a significant proportion of Generation Z demonstrates the ability to effectively search for, interpret, and apply information. This may be attributed to their practical orientation and focus on functional outcomes. However, this same tendency can also contribute to challenges with maintaining concentration.

## Brand and brand communication

[Kotler and Armstrong \(2017\)](#) defined a brand as follows: A brand can be expressed by a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements; the basic functions of a brand include identifying the products and services of a given company and differentiation, i.e., distinguishing them from competing companies. According to authors ([Konecnik, 2012](#); [Machková, 2015](#)), a brand can also be expressed by using a certain brand representative or opinion leaders/ambassadors. From the consumer’s perspective, the brand is considered a significant part of the product, as it significantly contributes to its value ([Kotler and Armstrong, 2017](#); [Zhao et al., 2021](#); [Biz and Schubert, 2024](#)).

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2017) and Yi et al. (2022), brand equity is determined by customer loyalty, brand awareness, the extent to which it embodies quality, and how strongly consumers identify with its products; it is further influenced by patent protection of the products bearing the brand and its position within distribution and industrial networks. According to Machková (2015), Keller (2021) and Wei (2022), the basic functions of a brand include product, service, or company identification, and product and service differentiation and diversification. However, it can also fulfill other functions, such as a bearer of value, a guarantee of quality, or an image creator. A brand can also be considered a marketing tool enabling communication with consumers, business partners, and the general public.

The omnipresence of smartphones has contributed to a significant increase in online activity, especially among adolescents (Cheung et al., 2021). The most popular applications include Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube. On these platforms, people not only consume content but also actively create it. The followers of these users, who have gained the favor of many, follow all published content but also heed their advice or buy products based on their recommendations. Such users are perceived as influencers. Influencers spend considerable time creating content for their social media profiles and are well aware of their influencer status due to the constant influx of likes, shares, and reactions they receive on their posts (De Veirman et al., 2020; Radmann et al., 2021; Huynh et al., 2022).

It is essential for companies to know their target group, the characteristics of that group, and their purchasing preferences. One way to influence consumer purchasing preferences is through collaborations with famous personalities who can attract consumer attention and tactically influence the customer's purchase decision (Sun et al., 2021; Macheka et al., 2023). Brands have therefore started approaching these influencers to promote their products or services on their profiles in exchange for financial compensation or free promotional materials. Social media has thus enabled influencers to become an important part of the advertising process (De Veirman et al., 2020; Sriram et al., 2021; Firmanza and Artanti, 2022).

Influencer marketing is a form of marketing communication in collaboration with influencers capable of reaching hundreds to thousands of individuals on social networks (De Veirman et al., 2019; Belanche et al., 2021; Dhanesh et al., 2022; Handranata and Kalila, 2025). It can also be defined as the art and science of influencing people participating in the online environment who want to share information about a brand with their followers as sponsored content (Voráček and Bernardová, 2021). For brands to effectively target their potential customers, they must first target opinion leaders (influencers/athletes/bloggers, etc.) (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016). Brands are increasingly focusing on influencers to promote their products among their followers and beyond. Recommendations from influencers are perceived by consumers as a very credible form of word-of-mouth marketing, not as paid advertising, because they are often incorporated into daily posts on their social media accounts (Abidin, 2016; Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2025). Unfortunately, influencer marketing has also led to harmful practices, where influencers buy fake followers (bots) to be perceived as influential by brands (De Veirman et al., 2020).

According to the research and consulting company McKinsey, Generation Z constitutes 40% of the global consumer population

(Amed et al., 2019). Generation Z may be smaller than any of the other generations, but its influence outweighs its size. Given that they are exposed to so many brands daily – banner ads in mobile applications, suggested posts on social media, advertisements, etc. – Generation Z has become a group of demanding consumers. While being demanding does not equate to having less loyalty, it does mean that brands must work harder to earn and maintain their loyalty (Chen et al., 2022; Lili et al., 2022; Yi et al., 2022). To capture the attention of this digitally native generation, digital marketers and advertisers must develop targeted campaigns that feature engaging and entertaining content (De Veirman et al., 2019; Elkatmış, 2024). More than half of Generation Z members already tend to avoid advertising, as reported in several studies (Hossain, 2018; Pragathi and Saravanakumar, 2021; Broto, 2023).

Members of Generation Z increasingly rely on social media as their primary source of shopping inspiration. These researches also suggest that younger internet users tend to prefer social media platforms over traditional search engines when exploring brands (Dabija and Lung, 2019; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Wang, 2021). Capturing and maintaining the attention of this demographic through digital marketing and advertising is therefore essential, as such engagement serves a strategic function for companies (Razak, 2022; Fathinasari et al., 2023; Grechi et al., 2025). It not only serves to make the consumer aware of the offered benefits but also to educate the consumer (Munsch, 2021).

## Sport brands and social activism

Generation Z increasingly perceives brand affiliation as a reflection of personal identity and values (Xi et al., 2022; Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025). This cohort prioritizes trust, ethical alignment, and authenticity in its consumer relationships, often favoring brands that demonstrate social awareness and transparency (Harahap et al., 2023; Elrizal and Astuti, 2024). Their purchasing behavior is shaped by digital environments, particularly social media, which serves both as a research tool and a transactional platform (Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024). Consequently, effective marketing strategies targeting Generation Z must emphasize genuine engagement, inclusive representation, and purpose-driven communication (Salam et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Generation Z expects businesses to reflect diversity and transparency. They can easily communicate with individuals of different races, genders, or living in another country (Hayes, 2021; Van den Bergh et al., 2023). They want to be part of meaningful conversations and expect people to listen to what they have to say, regardless of their age or experience. They are particularly concerned with social, environmental, and political topics (Hernandez-Arriaza et al., 2023). According to the Gen Z Purpose Study (Novelli, 2019), nearly 87% of Generation Z have concerns about the environment. The research, which involved individuals aged 14–22 in the United States of America, shows the expectations and opinions of this generation on the involvement of companies in social and environmental issues, as well as the activities they are prepared to undertake to positively influence the issues they care about (Novelli, 2019; Dunne et al., 2023). Therefore, Generation Z actively supports brands that take responsibility for solving environmental and social problems (Narayanan, 2022; Pandita and Khatwani, 2022). There has



been a significant shift in the perspectives of Generation Z compared to the previous millennial generation regarding the environment (Lu and Kao, 2002; Casalegno et al., 2022; Dunne et al., 2023).

## Methods

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. This approach involved an initial quantitative data collection phase, followed by a qualitative phase designed to elaborate on and provide deeper meaning to the quantitative findings. The rationale for this sequential approach was to first identify broad patterns and trends in campaign perception across the sample and then to explore the underlying reasons and contextual factors influencing these perceptions through in-depth qualitative inquiry.

### Research sample – quantitative survey

The target population for this research comprised students who belong to Generation Z, defined in this study as individuals born between 1995 and 2010. Due to the large size of this population, a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling combined with snowball sampling, was utilized to recruit participants. This method enabled efficient recruitment of participants from relevant university networks and ensured the inclusion of respondents who met the age criteria (born between 1995 and 2010). While this approach may limit the generalizability of findings, it is commonly used in social science research when targeting specific demographic groups and when random sampling is not feasible. The research sample for quantitative survey consists of 199 respondents and the final structure of respondents is presented in Table 1.

### Quantitative data collection

The first phase of the research involved a quantitative survey administered online. This method was chosen for its efficiency in reaching a large number of respondents, ensuring anonymity, and standardizing the delivery of questions. The questionnaire was structured into several sections, beginning with demographic questions to confirm the respondents' gender, age (to ensure they belonged to Generation Z). Filter questions were incorporated to automatically terminate the survey for respondents who did not meet the inclusion criteria.

TABLE 1 Structure of respondents in the quantitative survey.

Gender	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (%)
Men	98	49.24
Women	97	48.7
Other	2	1.03
Prefer not to say	2	1.03
Total	199	100

Source: own data.

The core of the questionnaire focused on assessing respondents' awareness, perceptions, and attitudes towards Adidas marketing campaigns. A variety of question types were employed, including multiple-choice questions, Likert scales (typically 5-point or 7-point scales using emojis), The Net Promoter Score (NPS) question and open-ended questions.

The content of the questionnaire was carefully developed based on an operationalization of key research constructs (see Figure 1) derived from a comprehensive review of academic literature on Generation Z characteristics, consumer behavior, marketing strategies, and brand perception.

### Qualitative data collection

The second phase involved conducting two focus group interviews. Focus groups were chosen as the qualitative method to facilitate group interaction and the co-construction of meaning regarding their perceptions of Adidas campaigns. This method allows for the exploration of shared understandings and diverse perspectives within a group setting (Munsch, 2021; Konstantinou and Jones, 2022).

Participants for the focus groups were recruited to ensure that they did not know each other prior to the session to encourage more open and candid discussions. A total of 30 potential respondents were contacted, of which 17 agreed to participate (falling within the range of 19 to 24 years old). Focus groups, each consisting of 8 (equal gender distribution of four males and four females) to 9 participants (comprising four males and five females), were facilitated by a moderator using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to delve deeper into the themes that emerged from the quantitative survey results, such as perceptions of brand values, campaign effectiveness, the role of influencers, and specific reactions to Adidas campaigns (see Figure 2).

The moderator encouraged all participants to share their views and facilitated discussion while ensuring that all key topics were covered. The focus group sessions were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis.

Data collection for both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research was conducted from April to May 2024.

### Data analysis

The quantitative data from the online survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify overall trends. The qualitative data from the focus group transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within the data set. The analysis involved several stages, including familiarization with the transcripts, coding relevant segments of text, grouping codes into broader themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and finally, interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions and the quantitative results.

The qualitative analysis of interview transcripts was carried out using MAXQDA Analytics Pro (version 24), capitalizing on its advanced analytical functionalities to ensure a rigorous interpretation of the data. The methodological framework encompassed the following components: (1) systematic coding,

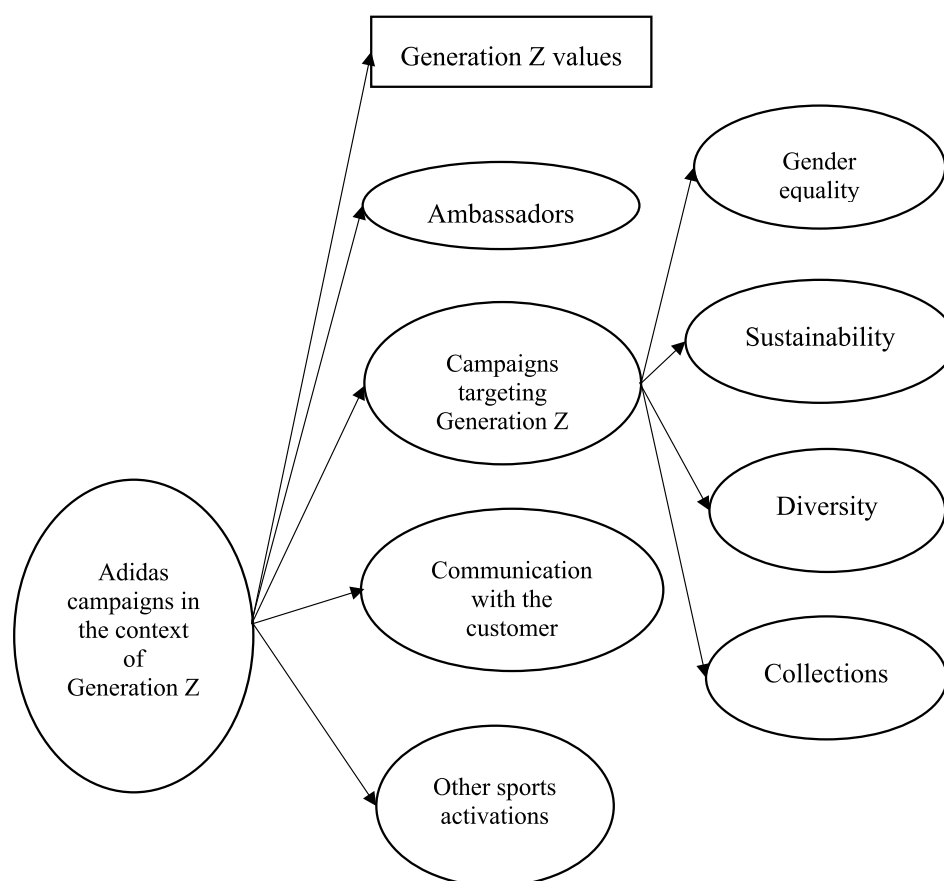


FIGURE 1  
Operationalization for quantitative survey. Source: own production.

which entailed the construction and application of a hierarchical coding scheme to thematically categorize the data; and (2) memoing (memos), whereby the integrated note editor was employed to document critical observations and interpretative insights.

## Ethical considerations

This research adhered to strict ethical guidelines. The study involving humans was approved by the Ethics Committee. Participants in both the quantitative and qualitative phases were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their right to withdraw at any time, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants in the focus groups provided their written consent prior to the commencement of the discussion. All data collected were stored securely and anonymized during analysis and reporting to protect the privacy of the participants.

## Results

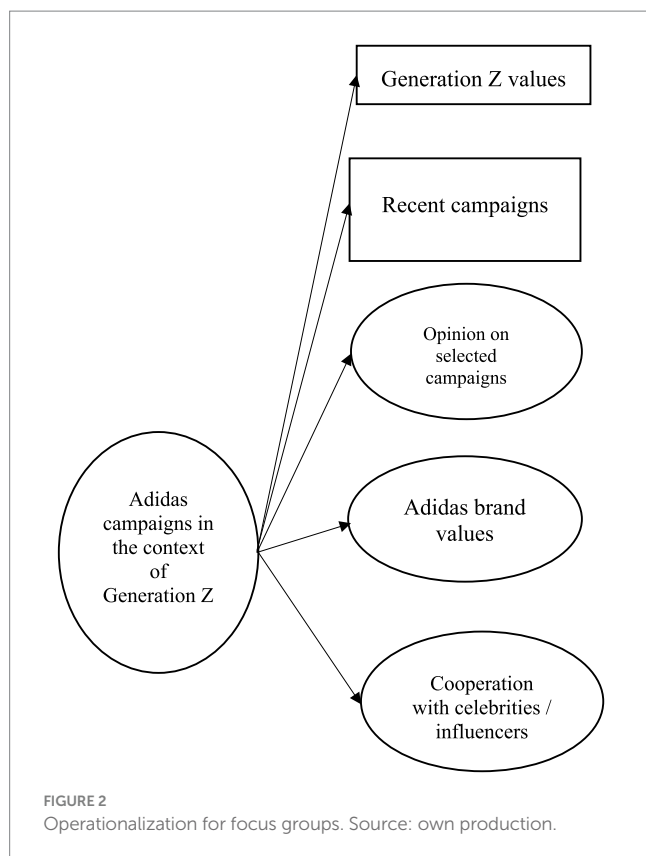
This section presents the findings from the quantitative questionnaire survey, complemented by insights from qualitative focus group discussions. The results are structured thematically

according to the previously defined operationalizations (see Figures 1, 2).

## Generation Z values

The analysis of the “Gen Z values” dimension reveals several dominant characteristics and values among the surveyed Generation Z cohort (see Figure 3).

Sport as a form of entertainment or mental relaxation emerges as the most overwhelmingly chosen value at 83.42%. Generation Z perceives physical activity beyond mere performance or competition. This highlights a crucial shift for sports brands and initiatives: appealing to the recreational and mental health benefits of sport is more impactful than solely focusing on competitive drills. Mental health emphasis is the second most prominent value at 60.30%. This underscores the importance of integrating mental wellbeing narratives into active living promotions. Fear of failure (58.80%) stands out as a significant concern. Values related to professional life, such as Flexible working hours/location (52.26%), Preference for feedback (49.75%), and Work-life balance (49.75%), are highly ranked. Communication via images/GIFs/emoticons/emojis (48.74%) highlights Gen Z's preference for visual and interactive content, a hallmark of their digital native identity. This confirms that marketing and engagement strategies for active living must leverage visually rich social media

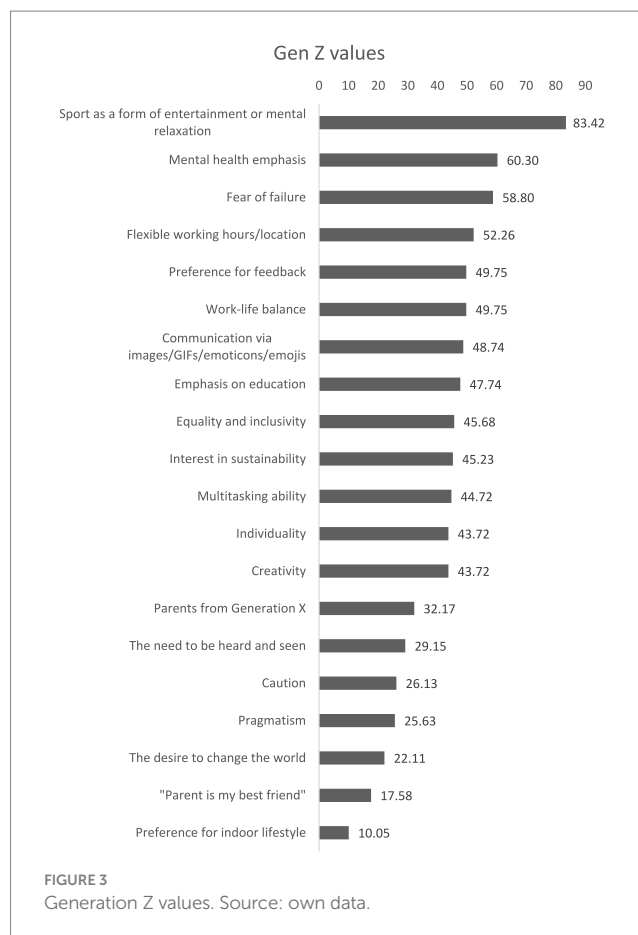


platforms effectively. Equality and inclusivity (45.68%) and Interest in sustainability (45.23%) are significant values, reflecting Gen Z's heightened social and environmental awareness. Emphasis on education (47.74%) and Multitasking ability (44.72%) reinforce Gen Z's characteristics as highly educated and adept at managing multiple inputs. Individuality (43.72%) and Creativity (43.72%) further underscore their desire for self-expression and unique experiences. Values such as Preference for indoor lifestyle (10.05%) and "Parent is my best friend" (17.58%) ranked lowest. While the latter is sometimes cited as a Gen Z trait, its low ranking in this survey is notable. The low preference for an indoor lifestyle contrasts with the idea that "helicopter parents" raised Gen Z primarily indoors, suggesting a strong desire for active engagement, further supported by the top-ranked value of sport as entertainment.

The initial discussions in both focus groups, revealed several prominent values that participants associated with Generation Z. While respondents were not provided with a predefined list of values, a consistent emphasis emerged on "sustainability and environmental interest," "equality and respect for others," "Authenticity and Individuality," "Work-Life Balance," and "Low Stress Resilience / Fear of Failure."

## Brand ambassadors of Adidas

The investigation into respondents' awareness of Adidas brand ambassadors a substantial 43.66% of respondents indicated "I do not know" or "Not familiar" when asked about sports ambassadors (see Table 2). Among those who could identify sport ambassadors, Lionel



Messi was most frequently mentioned (41 times) among international athletes, followed by Jude Bellingham (9 times).

For celebrity and influencer ambassadors (see Table 3), awareness levels were remarkably similar and low. Approximately 60% of respondents selected "I do not know" or "Not familiar." Jenna Ortega was the most frequently mentioned (14 times), followed by the former ambassador Kanye West (9 times).

This general lack of recognition for celebrity and influencer ambassadors may be influenced by the non-transparent nature of some collaborations, where sponsored content might not be explicitly labeled, thus hindering the formation of a clear association between the celebrity and the brand in the audience's mind.

## Awareness of campaigns

Awareness (see Table 4) of the Adidas & Parley Run for the Ocean campaign was moderate: 30.65% of respondents recognized the campaign. 76.38% of respondents were unaware of the Love Unites campaign. Similarly, 75.38% of respondents did not recognize the Let Love Be Your Legacy campaign. The Sportswear collection, specifically targeted at Generation Z, had limited recognition: 53.77% of respondents were unaware of it. The termination of Adidas's collaboration with Kanye West in 2022 was known among 51.26% of respondents. The Support is Everything campaign, focused on the importance of correctly sized sports bras, was largely unknown, with 71.86% of respondents unaware of it.

TABLE 2 Brand ambassadors of Adidas - Athletes.

Athlete	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (%)
Lionel Messi	41	20.60
Jude Bellingham	9	4.52
James Harden	7	3.52
David Beckham	4	2.01
Other (single occurrences)	51	25.63
I do not know/Not familiar	87	43.66
Total	199	100

Source: own data.

TABLE 3 Brand ambassadors of Adidas - celebrities/influencers.

Celebrity/ Influencer	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (%)
Jenna Ortega	14	7.04
Kanye West	9	4.52
Kendall Jenner	6	3.02
Other (single occurrences)	51	25.63
I do not know/Not familiar	119	59.79
Total	199	100

Source: own data.

Direct communication via mobile applications like WhatsApp or Instagram groups was largely an unknown or unutilized channel for respondents: 90.45% of respondents had not encountered it. Awareness of Adidas's collaborations with youth sports leagues or high school/university enterprises was low: 75.88% of respondents were unaware. Only 12.56% of respondents noted such collaborations. Similarly, 81.91% of respondents were unaware of Adidas's NFTs, with 12.06% of respondents demonstrating knowledge. These results indicate that these more niche or nascent marketing efforts have yet to reach broad awareness within the surveyed Gen Z student population.

Discussions regarding specific Adidas campaigns revealed distinct patterns of awareness and factors influencing their recognition. Participants initially struggled to spontaneously name any recent Adidas campaigns. Even when prompted with specific campaigns, awareness was limited. It was only recognized after a reminder, evoking positive (supportive) emotions in some participants but neutral feelings in others. Both focus groups indicated that campaign recognition was significantly higher when familiar celebrities/influencers (e.g., Jenna Ortega) were featured and when campaigns were promoted on social media platforms. The "Sportswear" collection and the "Let Love Be your Legacy" campaign were also recalled due to the presence of specific personalities in their promotional videos. This observation suggests that Gen Z respondents are most responsive to campaigns that leverage familiar personalities and are prominently featured on prevalent social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok. This aligns with focus group participant insights, such as

TABLE 4 Awareness of campaigns.

Campaign	Response	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (%)
Adidas & Parley Run for the Ocean	Yes	61	30.65
	No	113	56.78
	I cannot remember	25	12.56
Love Unites	Yes	20	10.05
	No	152	76.38
	I cannot remember	27	13.57
Let Love Be Your Legacy	Yes	20	10.05
	No	150	75.38
	I cannot remember	29	14.57
Sportswear	Yes	70	35.18
	No	107	53.77
	I cannot remember	22	11.06
The termination of Adidas's collaboration with Kanye West in 2022	Yes	102	51.26
	No	88	44.22
	I cannot remember	9	4.52
NFT	Yes	24	12.06
	No	163	81.91
	I cannot remember	12	6.03
Support is Everything	Yes	37	18.59
	No	143	71.86
	I cannot remember	19	9.55
WhatsApp/ Instagram Communication	Yes	12	6.03
	No	180	90.45
	I do not know	7	3.52
Youth sports leagues	Yes	25	12.56
	No	151	75.88
	I cannot remember	23	11.56

Source: own data.

Woman 1: "For me, I would add to focus more on Influencer marketing. Because in the questionnaire, I could not remember a single ambassador among the influencers."

## Emotional response to campaigns

This section presents an interpretation of emotional responses to various Adidas campaigns, which were used in research in the context of Generation Z (see Table 5).



TABLE 5 Emotional response to campaigns – questionnaire survey ( $n = 199$ ).

Emoji interpretation	Adidas & Parley Run for the Ocean		Love Unites		Let Love Be Your Legacy		Sportswear – Mary Fowler		Sportswear – Jenna Ortega		Support is everything	
Anger, indignation	14	(7.04%)	27	(13.57%)	19	(9.55%)	13	(6.53%)	13	(6.53%)	13	(6.53%)
Sadness, disappointment	1	(0.50%)	19	(9.55%)	15	(7.54%)	3	(1.51%)	5	(2.51%)	17	(8.54%)
Neutral emotion	41	(20.60%)	80	(40.20%)	84	(42.21%)	51	(25.63%)	53	(26.63%)	51	(25.63%)
Super, cool	39	(19.60%)	23	(11.56%)	31	(15.58%)	67	(33.67%)	51	(25.63%)	34	(17.09%)
Surprise	33	(16.58%)	12	(6.03%)	17	(8.54%)	11	(5.53%)	17	(8.54%)	17	(8.54%)
Joy	32	(16.08%)	19	(9.55%)	18	(9.05%)	40	(20.10%)	42	(21.11%)	19	(9.55%)
Enthusiasm	39	(19.60%)	19	(9.55%)	15	(7.54%)	14	(7.04%)	18	(9.05%)	48	(24.12%)

Source: own data.

“Adidas & Parley Run for the Ocean” campaign highlighted Adidas’s commitment to sustainability by creating products from recycled ocean plastics. The overall emotional responses were more diversified, with “neutral emotion” (20.60%,  $n = 41$ ), “super, cool” (19.60%,  $n = 39$ ), and “enthusiasm” (19.60%,  $n = 39$ ) being the most frequent, closely followed by “surprise” (16.58%,  $n = 33$ ) and “joy” (16.08%,  $n = 32$ ). This suggests a generally more positive and engaged, albeit still somewhat neutral, reception compared to the LGBT+ campaigns.

LGBT+ themed campaigns (“Love Unites” & “Let Love Be your Legacy”) focused on themes of unconditional love, inclusion in sport, and gender equality, often featuring LGBT+ athletes and designers. The predominant overall emotional response to “Love Unites” was “neutral emotion” (40.20%,  $n = 80$ ). Similarly, for “Let Love Be your Legacy” campaign, “neutral emotion” was the most common overall response (42.21%,  $n = 84$ ).

“Sportswear” collection (Feat. Jenna Ortega & Mary Fowler) aimed to blend sportswear with everyday fashion, specifically targeting Generation Z with a “blackcore aesthetic.” For the campaign featuring Jenna Ortega, the overall emotional responses were primarily “neutral emotion” (26.63%,  $n = 53$ ) and “super, cool” (25.63%,  $n = 51$ ). For the campaign featuring Mary Fowler, “super, cool” was the most dominant emotion at 33.67% ( $n = 67$ ).

The “Support is Everything” campaign aimed to highlight the diversity of body shapes and the importance of correctly fitted sports bras. The aggregated data from Table 5 indicates that the primary emotional responses were “neutral emotion” (25.63%,  $n = 51$ ) and “enthusiasm” (24.12%,  $n = 48$ ), followed by “super, cool” (17.09%,  $n = 34$ ) and “joy” (9.55%,  $n = 19$ ).

The interpretation of emotional responses from Table 5 reveals that Adidas campaigns generally elicit neutral to moderately positive emotions such as “Super, cool,” “joy,” and “enthusiasm” among Generation Z respondents.

## Perception to campaigns and communication

This analysis delves into the intricate perceptions of Generation Z students regarding key Adidas marketing campaigns, integrating quantitative metrics from the survey (see Table 6) with qualitative insights from focus groups.

Respondents generally found the “Adidas & Parley Run for the Ocean” campaign’s content to resonate with them ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). There was a relatively strong agreement that it is important for the Adidas brand to address the theme of sustainability ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ). However, when considering purchasing, functionality and comfort were rated as more important than eco-friendliness ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ). Adidas’s engagement with sustainability was less frequently a factor considered in purchasing decisions ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The Net Promoter Score (NPS) for purchasing sports apparel/equipment from this collection to contribute to environmental protection was significantly negative at  $-46.23\%$  ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ). This indicates that critics (detractors) far outnumbered promoters regarding purchase likelihood based on the environmental aspect. This confirms the “Generation Z Paradox,” where stated values regarding sustainability often do not translate into actual purchasing behavior, with price and product utility taking precedence. The qualitative part of the research confirmed the “Generation Z Paradox,” where a discrepancy exists between stated values and actual purchasing behavior. Despite an expressed interest in sustainability, participants often prioritized price. Woman 4 explained: “I would really like to say that I choose clothes because of sustainability, but unfortunately, I have to say price. I do not have a stable income, but I think that in 10 years when I am in a different financial situation, I will look at it differently. But at the moment, it’s not relevant for me. Comfort is my top priority.” Similarly, Woman 3 admitted buying a sustainable item primarily because it was on sale, viewing sustainability as a secondary bonus: “I have a sweatshirt from a sustainable collection. But I have to admit that I bought it primarily because it was on sale. Of course, I saw it as a bonus that it had some added value, but the initial intention was the discount.”

The “Love Unites” campaign’s content garnered a low resonance score ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). The importance of Adidas addressing LGBT+ issues was rated low ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), and brand support for the LGBT+ community was rarely a factor in purchase decisions ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). The NPS for purchasing products from this collection to express LGBT+ affiliation was a highly negative  $-87.94\%$  ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ). The second LGBT+ themed (“Let Love Be your Legacy”) campaign resonated slightly more ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). The

TABLE 6 Perception to campaigns and communication – questionnaire survey ( $n = 199$ ).

Item	M	SD	NPS score
<b>Campaign: Adidas &amp; Parley run for the ocean</b>			
When deciding about my sports apparel purchasing. Functionality and comfort are more important than eco-friendliness.	3.92	0.96	
A factor I consider when purchasing is Adidas's engagement with sustainability.	2.77	1.18	
It is important to me that the Adidas brand addresses the theme of sustainability.	3.47	1.26	
The campaign's content resonated with me.	3.44	1.15	
How likely are you to purchase sports apparel/equipment made from plastic within this collection to contribute to environmental protection?*	5.93*	2.39*	−46.23*
<b>Campaign: Love Unites</b>			
The campaign's content resonated with me.	2.24	1.21	
It's important to me that the Adidas brand addresses LGBT+ issues.	2.32	1.39	
A factor I consider when making a purchase is that the Adidas brand supports the LGBT+ community.	1.82	1.12	
How likely are you to purchase any product from this collection to express your affiliation with the LGBT+ community?*	2.58*	2.65*	−87.94*
<b>Campaign: Let Love Be Your Legacy</b>			
The campaign's content resonated with me.	2.62	1.23	
It's important to me that the Adidas brand addresses gender equality issues.	2.81	1.38	
<b>Campaign: Sportswear</b>			
The collection resonated with me.	3.13	1.15	
I like/It's important to me that the brand blends sportswear with everyday fashion.	3.82	1.14	
The campaign would have been appealing to me even without influencers/celebrities.	3.47	1.17	
It's important to me whether the brand collaborates with influencers/celebrities.	2.28	1.17	
How likely are you to purchase any product from this collection because of the presence of the famous American actress Jenna Ortega?*	3.65*	2.94*	−75.88*
<b>The termination of Adidas's collaboration with Kanye West in 2022</b>			
It's important to me who a sports brand collaborates with.	3.27	1.39	
It's important to me that a sports brand only collaborates with influencers/athletes who share similar values.	3.10	1.41	
I'd prefer if sports brands only collaborated with athletes.	2.71	1.28	
I'm only concerned with the product's look/functionality, not the values of its ambassador.	3.04	1.29	
I agree with Adidas's decision to end its collaboration with Kanye West.	3.63	1.31	
<b>Campaign: Support is Everything</b>			
The campaign's content resonated with me.	3.11	1.31	
It's important to me that the Adidas sports brand highlights societal diversity.	3.19	1.32	
It's important to me that the Adidas sports brand features bodies of all shapes and sizes in its campaigns.	3.20	1.45	
It's important to me that the sports brand also features people with various forms of disability (e.g., Down syndrome, prosthetics) in its campaigns.	3.33	1.35	
I do not care what kind of people appear in campaigns.	3.18	1.29	
<b>WhatsApp/Instagram Communication</b>			
I would welcome Adidas communicating with me directly through the WhatsApp mobile app or Instagram groups.	1.82	1.10	
Support is Everything – post on Twitter (X)	Frequency		
Controversial	102	(51.26%)	
Offensive	5	(2.51%)	
Inappropriate	49	(24.62%)	
Well-executed	41	(20.60%)	
Positive	58	(29.15%)	
Negative	6	(3.02%)	

(Continued)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Item	M	SD	NPS score
Appropriate	36		(18.09%)
Boosts my self-confidence	44		(22.11%)
I do not care	61		(30.65%)

5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). \*Net Promoter Score (10-point scale). Source: own data.

importance of Adidas addressing gender equality issues was rated moderately ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ).

The “Sportswear” collection resonated moderately ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). There was strong agreement on the importance of blending sportswear with everyday fashion ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). The campaign’s appeal without influencers/celebrities received a mean score of 3.47 ( $SD = 1.17$ ), while the importance of brand collaboration with influencers/celebrities was rated low ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). The NPS for purchasing products, despite the presence of Jenny Ortega, was very negative at  $-75.88\%$  ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 2.94$ ). This suggests that while celebrity involvement might generate initial interest, it does not consistently translate into purchase intent among these Generation Z segments, aligning with overall findings on ineffective influencer engagement.

Regarding Kanye West collaboration termination, it is considered important who a sports brand collaborates with ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ). There’s slightly less agreement that a brand should only collaborate with influencers/athletes sharing similar values ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ). Respondents were relatively neutral on preferring collaboration only with athletes ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) or being concerned only with product look/functionality, not ambassador values ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). Agreement with Adidas’s decision to end the collaboration was mostly supported ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). Both focus groups overwhelmingly preferred collaborations with athletes over other influencers, perceiving athletes as more credible due to their authentic use of products in training and competition. Woman 4 elaborated: “I perceive athletes more, and it’s more appealing to me when it’s them than influencers. Because I know that those athletes use it every day for training or matches, and the product is comfortable and functional for them. So, for me, this advertisement is more effective. I would also welcome the involvement of sports influencers – for example, fitness trainers.” Participants largely supported Adidas’s termination of its collaboration with Kanye West, perceiving it as an alignment with brand values.

The “Support is Everything” campaign content resonated moderately ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). There was moderate agreement on the importance of Adidas highlighting societal diversity ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), featuring bodies of all shapes and sizes ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), and featuring people with disabilities ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). Interestingly, respondents were relatively neutral on whether they cared about the kind of people appearing in campaigns ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). The accompanying Twitter (X) post was predominantly perceived as “controversial” (51.26%,  $n = 102$ ), followed by “inappropriate” (24.62%,  $n = 49$ ) and “positive” (29.15%,  $n = 58$ ). A significant portion also selected “I do not care” (30.65%,  $n = 61$ ). The social media post for the campaign (featuring bare breasts) was met with significant criticism within focus groups, especially from some participants, who often interpreted it as an attempt to “grab attention.” Man 6 commented: “At first glance, the

deeper meaning did not occur to me. And I do not think it would occur to anyone. I agree they just wanted to grab attention.” However, Woman 5 also added a pragmatic perspective: “I agree. Generation Z responds strongly to controversy, so in that regard, it was probably the right move.” This reflected the survey finding that 51.26% of respondents considered the post “controversial.”

Respondents largely did not welcome Adidas communicating directly through WhatsApp or Instagram groups ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). This suggests a general disinterest or aversion to direct, potentially intrusive, communication channels.

Despite the emphasis on certain values, some focus groups participants expressed detachment from them in practice. As Man 2 stated: “They say Adidas campaigns reflect the true values and interests of Generation Z, but personally, I’m not interested in that.” This sentiment was echoed by Man 1, who critically remarked on what is perceived as Gen Z’s values: “Today, they say everyone is into sustainability, equality, especially gender, and also veganism. I personally do not care at all. Perhaps the best campaign for me is when they make clothes from plastic, that makes sense to me. But if you make shoes and want to support gender equality with them, then I do not really know what to imagine by that.” Some participants noted that Adidas campaigns could be perceived as generic. Woman 3 articulated this sentiment: “My personal take is that the ads blend together. I cannot say exactly which ad is from Nike and which is from Adidas. I remember it’s about sport, young people, an emphasis on some social value, but I cannot say with absolute certainty who the author is. The logo is quite indistinct for me.” This indicates that while Adidas is addressing social issues, its brand identity might be getting diluted by the message, a point that other participants agreed with. While social media was the most popular channel, some participants generally agreed on the effectiveness of outdoor advertising (OOH), a finding that differed across focus groups, with some expressing a feeling of being overwhelmed by such information.

## Discussion

This study aimed to identify how selected representatives of Generation Z perceive Adidas marketing campaigns. Our research indicated a moderate overall awareness of Adidas marketing campaigns among the Generation Z student population. While Adidas actively endeavors to target this demographic and connect with their values, a substantial portion of respondents (43.66%) indicated “I do not know” or “Not familiar” when asked about sports ambassadors, and approximately 60% had similar responses for celebrity and influencer ambassadors. This low recognition for celebrity and influencer ambassadors, despite their prominence in marketing strategies (De Veirman et al., 2020; Sriram et al., 2021; Firmanza and Artanti, 2022), suggests a potential disconnect between investment in

such collaborations and their actual impact on Generation Z awareness. This aligns with qualitative insights where participants struggled to spontaneously name recent Adidas campaigns unless prompted with specific, highly visible personalities featured on social media. Conversely, sportspersons like Lionel Messi were more frequently recognized and perceived as more credible brand ambassadors compared to celebrities and influencers. This finding is consistent with previous research by [Voráček and Bernardová \(2021\)](#) which highlights that advertisements involving athletes and bloggers are perceived as more effective due to consumers seeing the product in authentic use. Participants in our focus groups overwhelmingly preferred collaborations with athletes, viewing them as more credible because they genuinely use products in training and competition. This underscores the importance of authentic and credible brand ambassadors from the sports domain for this demographic.

Regarding communication channels, direct communication via mobile applications like WhatsApp or Instagram groups was largely unnoticed and not preferred by 90.45% of respondents. This suggests a general disinterest or aversion to direct, potentially intrusive, communication channels, despite Adidas's efforts since 2015 to use WhatsApp for direct customer communication. This contrasts with the general digital nativeness of Generation Z, who are accustomed to continuous interaction through social networking platforms ([Dolot, 2018](#); [Kannan and Kumar, 2022](#); [Elkatmış, 2024](#)). While Generation Z relies heavily on social media as their primary source of shopping inspiration ([Nielsen, 2017](#); [Dabija and Lung, 2019](#); [Djafarova and Bowes, 2021](#); [Wang, 2021](#)) and prefers visually engaging content ([Raslie, 2021](#)), the findings indicate a preference for less intrusive and more organic forms of engagement, rather than direct, personalized outreach. However, focus group participants largely agreed on the effectiveness of outdoor advertising (OOH), though some participants expressed being overwhelmed by such information, suggesting a nuanced receptivity based on individual context.

The study confirmed that campaigns addressing themes of sustainability and diversity generally resonated with respondents, suggesting an awareness and consideration of these values ([McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009](#); [Harahap et al., 2023](#); [Elrizal and Astuti, 2024](#)). Generation Z is known for its heightened sensitivity towards issues concerning social responsibility and equality ([Dragolea et al., 2023](#)), with nearly 87% expressing concerns about the environment ([Hernandez-Arriaza et al., 2023](#)). Our quantitative results showed strong agreement that it is important for Adidas to address sustainability ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) and moderate agreement on highlighting societal diversity ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), featuring bodies of all shapes and sizes ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), and people with disabilities ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). Furthermore, values such as sport as a form of entertainment or mental relaxation (83.42%), mental health emphasis (60.30%), work-life balance (49.75%), and communication via images/GIFs/emojis (48.74%) were highly ranked among surveyed Generation Z students, aligning with characteristics described in the literature ([Singh and Dangmei, 2016](#); [Amed, 2019](#); [Vieira et al., 2020](#); [Wilson, 2021](#); [Dragolea et al., 2023](#)).

However, the study vividly illustrated the “paradox of Generation Z,” where despite expressed interest in sustainability and ethical considerations, price and practicality often took precedence in stated purchase intentions ([Glover, 2024](#); [VMLY&R, 2024](#); [Seyfi et al., 2025](#)). For the “Adidas & Parley Run for the Ocean” campaign, while respondents generally found the content resonant ( $M = 3.44$ ,

$SD = 1.15$ ) and considered sustainability important for the brand ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ), functionality and comfort were rated more important than eco-friendliness ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) when deciding on purchases. This discrepancy between stated values and actual purchasing behavior, where economic realities influence decisions, strongly supports the “Generation Z Paradox” ([Burdette, 2024](#); [Glover, 2024](#); [VMLY&R, 2024](#); [Seyfi et al., 2025](#)).

Furthermore, LGBT+-themed campaigns (“Love Unites” and “Let Love Be Your Legacy”) elicited predominantly “neutral emotion” responses (40.20 and 42.21% respectively), and NPS for purchasing to express LGBT+ affiliation was highly negative (−87.94% for “Love Unites”). This indicates that while Adidas makes efforts to engage with these values ([Novelli, 2019](#); [Narayanan, 2022](#); [Pandita and Khatwani, 2022](#); [Dunne et al., 2023](#)), the overall impact and resonance within the student demographic are nuanced, and strong support does not necessarily translate to purchase intent, especially when a direct affiliation with the community is implied for purchase. These sentiments highlight that while these are widely cited Gen Z characteristics ([Dolot, 2018](#); [Pinto and Paramita, 2021](#); [Dragolea et al., 2023](#); [Rasheed et al., 2023](#)), they might not be universally adopted by all individuals within the cohort or influence all purchase decisions equally.

There was also a general indication of a potential disconnect between the recognition and impact of global Adidas campaigns within the specific context of the Generation Z demographic ([Hossain, 2018](#); [Pragathi and Saravanakumar, 2021](#); [Chen et al., 2022](#); [Lili et al., 2022](#); [Yi et al., 2022](#); [Broto, 2023](#)). Participants initially struggled to recall campaigns, and when they did, it was often due to the presence of familiar celebrities featured prominently on social media platforms. This can lead to campaigns being perceived as generic, blending with competitors like Nike. This suggests that while Adidas is addressing social issues, its brand identity might be getting diluted by the message, requiring a more tailored communication strategy to enhance recognition and impact among the Generation Z audience (see thematic map – [Figure 4](#)).

## Strengths and limitations of the study

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative online questionnaire with qualitative focus group discussions. This mixed-methods design allowed for the identification of broad patterns and trends in campaign perception across the sample, followed by a deeper exploration of underlying reasons and contextual factors influencing these perceptions through in-depth qualitative inquiry. The use of both Likert scales and the Net Promoter Score (NPS) in the quantitative phase provided comprehensive insights into emotional responses and purchase likelihood, while thematic analysis of focus group data offered rich, nuanced perspectives. The study's adherence to ethical guidelines, including informed consent and participant anonymity, ensured the integrity of the research process.

Despite its strengths, the study also has certain limitations that warrant consideration and suggest avenues for future research. The non-probability sampling method (convenience and snowball sampling) used for recruiting the 199 quantitative respondents and 17 focus group participants means that the findings, cannot be broadly



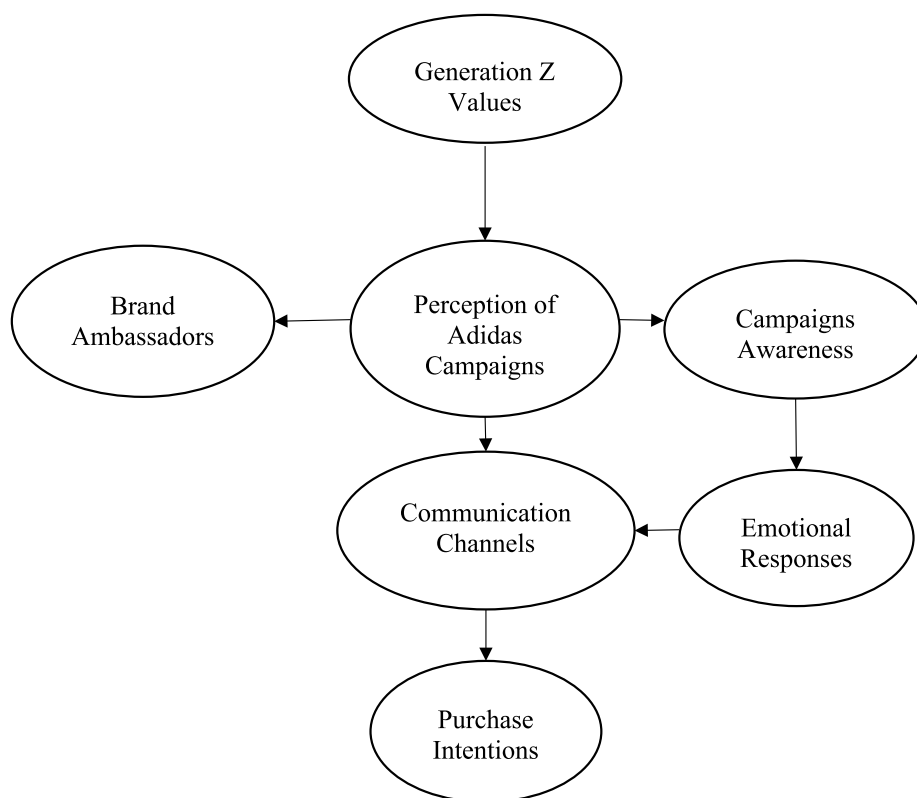


FIGURE 4  
Thematic map. Source: own production.

generalized to the entire Generation Z population. This limitation is further compounded by the study's specific geographical focus on the Czech Republic. The existing literature on Generation Z (e.g., McCrindle and Wolfinger, 2009; Dolot, 2018; Seemiller and Grace, 2018; Amed et al., 2019) often highlights global trends but also acknowledges regional specificities. Future research could benefit from comparative studies across different national contexts to explore how cultural and economic factors influence Generation Z's consumer behavior and perceptions of global brands like Adidas.

The qualitative phase, while providing rich insights, involved a limited number of focus groups (two with a total of 17 participants). While theoretical saturation was aimed for, some minority groups of stakeholders may have been inadvertently underrepresented. Additionally, the semi-structured interview format, while allowing for expansive discussions, sometimes resulted in broad responses that limited the depth of analysis on specific aspects. An original intent to conduct a semi-structured interview with an Adidas representative in the Czech Republic was unfortunately abandoned due to time constraints, which could have provided valuable industry perspective. Future studies could include interviews with industry professionals to gain a more holistic view of campaign design and market strategy.

Moreover, the "broad thematic coverage of the research may have left some emerging trends or niche areas underexplored," such as technological innovations or the role of smaller esports organizations. For instance, while Generation Z's interest in esports and gamification is noted, the study's findings on Adidas's ventures into NFTs showing low awareness (81.91% unaware) suggest that even digitally native

segments may not be uniformly engaged with all emerging digital assets. Future research could delve deeper into these specific areas, perhaps through more targeted methodologies.

## Future research directions

Finally, the discussion of gender differences within Generation Z, highlighted by recent research suggesting a significant divide, presents a compelling avenue for future study. This current research predominantly focused on general results, but a comparative analysis based on gender could yield crucial insights into how young men and women within Generation Z perceive marketing messages and brand values differently, especially given the distinct "bubbles" they inhabit on social media. This would align with the increasing recognition of the complexity and internal diversity within generational cohorts. Understanding these nuances is paramount for global brands like Adidas to carefully consider local market penetration and tailor their communication strategies effectively.

While this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of Generation Z university students regarding Adidas marketing campaigns, future research could further expand on these findings by employing larger and more diverse samples. One promising direction is the application of inferential statistical methods, such as hypothesis testing or variance analysis, which would allow for more robust generalizations and predictions about the broader Generation Z population. Incorporating these approaches in subsequent studies could help overcome the limitations of descriptive statistics and

provide deeper understanding of the factors influencing campaign effectiveness.

## Conclusion

This study investigated Generation Z's perceptions of Adidas marketing campaigns, revealing nuanced insights into their engagement and purchasing behavior. Overall awareness of Adidas campaigns among the surveyed respondents was moderate. A significant finding highlights the credibility of sportspersons over celebrities and influencers as brand ambassadors, with athletes like Lionel Messi being more frequently recognized and perceived as more authentic due to their genuine product use in training and competition.

While Generation Z expresses affinity for values such as sustainability and diversity, demonstrating an awareness and consideration of these issues, the research unveiled a notable “paradox of Generation Z.” Despite stated interest in eco-friendliness and ethical considerations, purchase decisions often prioritize price, functionality, and comfort. Campaigns centered on LGBT+ themes, for instance, primarily elicited neutral emotional responses, and the likelihood of purchase for direct affiliation was notably low, suggesting that expressed values do not consistently translate into consumer action.

Furthermore, direct communication via mobile applications was largely unnoticed and not preferred by this demographic, indicating a preference for less intrusive and more organic forms of digital engagement. The overall recognition and impact of global Adidas campaigns within the surveyed Gen Z segment often lacked distinctiveness, at times blending with competitors' efforts. Consequently, global brands like Adidas are advised to prioritize authentic brand ambassador partnerships within the sports domain and to meticulously tailor communication strategies to enhance local market recognition and impact, while acknowledging the economic realities that significantly influence Generation Z's purchasing decisions.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Charles University, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Ethics Committee. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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## Author contributions

DO: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JV: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. GB: Data curation, Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. RB: Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

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