

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in  
Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

THE GEN-Z SNEAKERHEAD PARADOX: BALANCING SUSTAINABILITY AND  
STREETWEAR IN THE WORLD OF NIKE: CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

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**01/06/2023**

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## **1. Introduction**

Sustainability has become an increasingly important concept in today's world. While there being various different definition and applications, it's relevance is becoming more clear due to the imminent ecological crisis we find ourselves in (Pisani 2006). Especially in recent years, companies and consumers have become more aware of the importance of sustainability and its impact on the society, economy, and environment. As a result, sustainability has become a key consideration for both companies and consumers.

This literature review explores the definition of sustainability and its various dimensions. Thereby, it will dive deeper into the perspectives of both companies and consumers on sustainability. Additionally, the literature reviews will look at the challenges and opportunities that arise from the implementation of sustainable practices.

The literary analysis will begin by defining sustainability and its dimensions. Then, it will examine the reasons why sustainability has become a critical issue for companies. Next, it will dive deeper into the motivators for consumers to opt for sustainable products. Finally, it will conclude by providing proposals for further research after reviewing the gaps in the literature.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Corporate Responsibility**

#### **2.1.1 Definition and Types of Sustainability**

Sustainability poses a challenge in terms of its definition due to its vastness and complexity, which comes from its applicability to various ecological and social situations (Allen 1993). To define the concept, one must first outline the amounts and varieties of synonyms that are used in literature when discussing sustainability. These include the following: maintenance, continuation, institutionalization, routinization, and durability. This continuously undermines the main objective of sustainability because, without a well-known and widely accepted definition, it is unclear how researchers and firms operationalize and measure sustainability (Moore 2017).

Despite the contemporary complexity and vastness of the term, we can see that the concept dates back centuries ago. The term ‘sustainability’ arises in the 17th century, when it first emerged as the German equivalent of *Nachhaltigkeit*, used by authors such as Evelyn and Carlowitz. Their most prominent application of the term was in response to dwindling forest resources all around Europe (Warde 2011). Sustainability, or sustainable development, is a concept that emerged in the context of a growing awareness of an imminent ecological crisis at the end of the 20th century (Pisani 2006). The concept of ‘sustainable development’ was popularized by the Brundtland Commission, which introduced it into international policy discourse. The commission defined the term as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Pope, Annandale and Mirrison-Suanders 2004, 597; Commission Brundtland 1987). Later, the term also became relevant among political economists during the industrial revolution. They questioned to what extent economic and demographic growth would be possible and desirable.

Thereby, they recognized the trade-off between wealthy generations and social justice (Lumley and Armstrong 2004). Only in the late 20th century, the term got its modern definition which fits in the broad global context. Eventually, this term was conceded in the three-pillar conception of sustainability. Despite the lack of an exact point of origin and concrete theoretical description for this conceptualization, its gradual emergence has become ubiquitous. The three-pillar conceptualization, which is often represented by three circles centered around sustainability, consists of the following: social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Purvis, Mao and Robinson 2019; Elkington 1994).

### ***Social Sustainability***

Social sustainability is defined as a term ‘that generally refers to the social dimensions of sustainability. In a normative sense, it refers to the social goals of sustainability strategies (Partridge 2014). This part of the three-pillar conceptualization is given the least attention in the literature, due to economic and environmental sustainability being considered more prominent in society. However, social sustainability has gained increased recognition in the past years. Concrete and specific definitions of the term do not come to fruition as there is no consensus about the different aspects. Lately, there has been an evolution regarding the complexity of the term. Traditionally, ‘hard’ social sustainability referred to employment and poverty alleviation. Nowadays, it has been extended by ‘soft’ themes, namely those related to happiness, social mixing, and a sense of place. It is however important to note that these aspects are more complex and therefore less measurable (Colantonio 2009). Thus, social sustainability, especially of manufacturing enterprises, urgently needs to be researched, analyzed and assessed (Garbie 2016). Companies should not only consider social sustainability as being relevant for social purposes but also for financial purposes. Research shows that four specific success-related social sustainability dimensions of corporate culture are predictors of the financial success of a company. These include sustainability strategy and leadership; mission,

communication, and learning; social care and work life; and loyalty and identification (Schönborn et al. 2019).

It is of interest to the present study to research the general importance of social sustainability to the to-be-researched target group. Thereby it is of interest to study the significance of the variances in social responsibility according to the respondents.

### ***Economic Sustainability***

Defining economic sustainability within the broader concept of sustainability is challenging due to the various possible interpretations of the term. Research suggests two different ways of approaching this complex concept: one is from an “inside” perspective, which considers the business context more conventionally; the other is the “outside approach” (Doane and MacGillivray 2001). As for the business context, economic sustainability is defined as “using the assorted assets of the company efficiently to allow it to continue functioning profitability over time” (BusinessDictionary 2018, 1). This economic sustainability from a business perspective initially disregards any depletion of natural resources, ecosystem services, or welfare if the profitability is maintained (Turner 1993). The conventional view of economic sustainability was based on the assumption that natural resources were unlimited, which is no longer valid in today’s world. It is now widely recognized that natural resources are well-nigh exhaustible. Therefore, in contrast to this traditional approach, a so-called ‘outside approach’ to economic sustainability would define it differently, namely as: “economic development without any loss of ecological or social sustainability” (Jeronen 2020, 1). While there is a link between all three pillars of the sustainability conceptualization, the overlap between environmental and economic sustainability seems to be the strongest. Research says that focusing on maintaining the quality of the environment is vital for successfully performing economic activities and quality of life for people (Klarin 2018).

It is of interest to the present research to study the relevance and application of economic sustainability to the to-be-research market and its key players.

### ***Environmental Sustainability***

Environmental sustainability is a part of sustainability that ‘emphasizes retaining and protecting environmental resources and the resilience of ecosystems (Hostovsky 2014). This pillar of sustainability conceptualization’s purpose is to overpass the division between scientists and policymakers (Thangavel and Sridevi 2015). Environmental sustainability mainly encompasses the use of environmental resources, these form the base for an economy operating in quantitative terms. This is a very relevant topic considering the immense global material resource use, which for instance doubled between 1900 and 2005. The UNEP Environment Programme shows that cities are responsible for 80% of the global economic growth and are thereby accountable for 75% of global resource consumption. This is noteworthy evidence of global environmental pollution when considering the fact that cities make up more than 50% of the global population. Furthermore, there is a noticeable change in the decoupling both of resources and impact which shows the need for absolute reductions in resource usage, which is required to make the transition to a greener global economy (United Nations Environment Programme International Resource Panel 2013; Kalmykova, Rosade and Patrício 2016).

Over the course of its development, the comprehension and practical implementation of environmental sustainability and awareness have undergone significant evolution. Initially characterized by pollution treatments commonly referred to as end-of-pipe policies. Later the conceptualization of sustainable practices has progressed to encompass a shift towards product re-designment aligned with the imperatives of the natural ecosystems. Furthermore, this upstream route has led to the topic of sustainable consumption, which in turn is completing the circle of environmental sustainability.

When environmental sustainability is applied in practice to the development of tangible goods, territorial, and architectural design, it is referred to as *ecodesign*. Yet, *ecodesign* is, like various terms considering sustainability, a complex term to define with the multiple approaches it grants. *Ecodesign* mainly is about ‘designing tendency, conscious of the environmental impacts of its products’ (4). Altogether, it is crucial to note that the transition from environmental redesign to *ecodesign* has the ambition to improve global efficiency with the selection of low-impact materials and energy sources. When implementing this, it is important to keep the consumers’ behavior and lifestyle in mind. Eventually, they must be convinced to alter their behavior, leading to the purchase and consumption of environmentally sustainable goods. A crucial part of designing and producing in an environmentally sustainable way is minimizing resource consumption. The two main components of this strategy are minimizing materials consumption and energy consumption. Minimizing material consumption can be constructed by minimizing- material contents, scraps, and discards, or avoiding packaging, materials consumption during usage, or materials consumption during the product development phase (Vezzoli and Manzini 2008).

It is therefore of interest to the study to dig deeper into how environmental sustainability can be applied to the to-be-researched matter while taking the consumers’ wishes into account.

### **2.1.2 Companies’ Perspective on Sustainability**

Corporate sustainability (CS) refers to the application of sustainable practices in companies, while corporate social responsibility (CSR) is another term that has been used interchangeably with corporate sustainability, despite past differences in their definitions. Nowadays, these terms are often used to refer to the same concept of integrating sustainable and responsible practices into a company's operations and decision-making processes (Montiel 2008). CS is a

business approach that is highly important to managers, as a study conducted in 2020 shows that 90% of the surveyed business managers see CS as important for their business (Kiron et al. 2017). Nowadays, CS is not only an asset used by companies to better their reputation management. A study on the motivations of companies to opt for CS shows that one of the companies' reasons for addressing sustainability is to improve operational efficiency and lower their costs. These two reasons are followed by alignment with the company's business goals, mission, and values, which consider new growth opportunities. Furthermore, following a McKinsey report on CS, more companies are taking proper action to genuinely pursue their sustainability goals through all their business facets. The predominant types of action companies undertake are reducing energy use in operations, reducing waste from operations, managing corporate reputation for sustainability, and responding to regulatory constraints or opportunities (Bonini 2012).

Bansal and Roth (2000) define three different motivations for why companies opt for a CS approach, namely: legitimacy, competitiveness, and social responsibility. They distinguished three contextual conditions by which these motivations were influenced: field cohesion, issue salience, and individual concern (Bansal and Roth 2000). Legitimacy concerns complying with legislation and establishing environmental committees. Furthermore, competitiveness implies a win-win logic that can be established through sustainability practices (Porter and van der Linde 1995). Whereas many companies see sustainability as an additional cost, it can work to companies' advantage by increased adeptness of resource usage, ROI (return of investment), increased sales, development of new markets, improved reputation, and product differentiation (Albino, Balice and Dangelico 2009). Finally, social responsibility is also seen as a significant motivator for companies to apply a CS approach because of social obligations and ethical values they see as essential (Welford 1997).

The previously named Corporate Social Responsibility comes from the ethical responsibility to consider the needs of humanity, which corporate managers must consider. This responsibility is underpinned by four theories, the first of them being the Social Contract Theory, which asserts that society is based on explicit and implicit contracts between individuals, organizations, and institutions, where corporations enter these contracts with society and receive resources, goods, and societal approval in exchange for good behavior. The second theory is the Social Justice Theory, which is centered around the responsibility that companies must address social injustice and promote fairness in their businesses and operations. Furthermore, the third theory is the Rights Theory. It investigates the meaning of not only human rights but also property rights. This theory says that property rights should not overshadow basic human rights. The last theory is considered the Deontological Theory, also referred to as the 'golden rule'. It sheds light on the belief that corporate managers, just like everybody else, have a moral duty to treat everyone as they would like to be treated themselves (Wilson 2003). These social theories are crucial as to what motivates corporate managers and board teams to opt for a more sustainable approach. Another study that researched the motivations of Canadian and Italian companies to adopt a more sustainable approach confirms the previous findings on the topic. The study showed that compliance with regulations, enhancing competitiveness, and ecological responsibilities are the main reasons to go for a CS approach (Dangelico and Devashish 2010). Another study on sustainability published in 2019 cites, having to comply with social and environmental regulations as the first incentive for companies to apply CS. Thereby, it mentions the business opportunities provided by sustainability targets (Grigorescu et al. 2019).

Various resources cite matching incentives for companies to opt for a CS approach. Next to legitimacy, the biggest reason for companies to switch to a sustainable approach comes from economic motives. Companies see sustainability as a strategy to create business opportunities

and eventually increase their profit margin. Various studies have researched the link between environmental performance and economic performance, and they show slightly different outcomes. Thus, research shows that the better a company performs on the pollution index, the higher the ROI (Bragdon and Marlin 1972). Another study found a negative correlation between CS and stock prices (Vance 1975). While one study found that there is no correlation between CS and stock performance (Alexander and Buchholz 1978). Further research found a positive correlation between CS and ROE (Return on equity) (Heinz 1976). The correlation between economy and environment seems to be unclear, however, it can be considered compatible and therefore profitable (Günther, Günther and Hoppe 2004). All in all, previous studies have validated the interconnection between environmental performance and economic achievements, it also confirms the moderation of this link by industry growth (Russo and Fouts 1997).

A McKinsey study shows that 60% of researched executives see climate change and corporate sustainability as strategically crucial to implement. They connect the importance of the topic to product development, brand management, and investment planning. Therefore, 61% of these executives expect increasing profits when applying the CS approach (McKinsey & Company 2008).

Despite these great forecasts and already-known facts, CS also received criticism due to the amount of greenwashing that is carried out when sustainability is used as a strategic business model (Bowen and Aragon-Correa 2014). According to Ottman and Mallen (2010), greenwashing can be defined as “the practice of companies making false or exaggerated claims about the environmental benefits of their products or services to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers” (Ottman and Mallen 2010). A study on existing literature on this topic notes that greenwashing can be arranged into three categories, being: vague, irrelevant, and false. These wrong acquisitions mainly are done using ambiguous language, primarily mentioning irrelevant or insignificant environmental factors, or in extreme cases the

establishment of green brand identities. The study shows that there are several motivators for companies to consciously opt for greenwashing. These vary from the need to create competitive advantages, to have to comply with regulations, and or to meet the expectations of stakeholders such as the consumer or supplier. The greenwashing concept eventually works counterproductively, as, due to transparency and credibility reasons, these false acquisitions will come to the surface (Öberseder, Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2013). Another environmental report on the topic describes various common practices which are often implemented by companies to mislead their stakeholders. These seven practices are hidden trade-offs, no proof, vagueness, irrelevance, lesser of the two evils, and fibbing fields (TerraChoice Environmental Marketing 2010). Other researchers see greenwashing as a symbolic action, Siano et al. (2017) state: "...which tend to deflect attention to minor issues or lead to creating 'green talk' through statements aimed at satisfying stakeholder requirements in terms of sustainability but without any concrete action" (27).

Furthermore, CS received significant criticism due to a lack of information on how to implement a sustainability approach. There is a substantial disconnect between micro-level progress and macro-level deterioration (Dyllick and Muff 2016). Bridging this research-practice gap is complicated because of the lack of capabilities (Bansal et al. 2012). Thereby, studies show that the cause of this problem lies with the researchers, who do not properly link the results of natural sciences with the corporate businesses and therefore make it more complicated to execute sustainability practices (Howard-Grenville et al. 2014). Another study argues the lack of clarity about the bottom line of CS, which leads to the problems practitioners of CS experience (Meuer, Koelbel and Hoffmann 2020). In conclusion, there is more empirical work to be done to get a better understanding of CS as a strategy and how to implement it in businesses (Kitsios, Kamariotou and Micheal 2020).

### **2.1.3 Consumers' Perspective on Sustainability**

As mentioned before, one of the factors why companies opt for sustainability practices is competitiveness (Bansal en Roth 2000). Naturally, companies can only be competitive once they are of interest to their consumers. Applying a sustainable approach stimulates this as consumers are increasingly more aware of sustainable production and products. A study by Huang, Lee and Chen (2002) supports this notion. They researched the Green Perceived Value (GPV) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) regarding sustainable sneakers and found that they both have a significant effect on brand image. Thereby, GPV and brand image had a significant effect on consumers' attitudes toward purchasing environmentally friendly sneakers. On the contrary, CSR and consumer conformity had no significant effect on consumers' attitudes toward purchasing these sustainable sneakers. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of communicating sustainability to the consumers, which according to them can be done in various ways, such as through events, media coverage, and/or publicizing CSR performance (Huang, Lee and Chen 2002). A Nielsen IQ study (2023) emphasizes the need for sustainability seen from a consumer's perspective. The study shows that 78% of American consumers say that a sustainable lifestyle is critical to them (McKinsey and NielsenIQ 2023). Thereby, another study shows that Gen-Z is especially interested in sustainability, as nine of ten Gen-Z consumers think that companies must act on environmental and social issues. As Gen-Z made up 40% of global consumers by 2020, this is another viable reason for companies to opt for a sustainable approach (Amed et al. 2019). Furthermore, a McKinsey study (2020) shows that 60 to 70% of all researched American consumers are willing to pay more for an environmentally and ethically packaged product field (Feber et al. 2020). Following these statistics, it is a strategic move for corporates to consider this sustainable approach (Feber et al. 2020).

For the consumer to be able to perceive a brand as sustainable, it is crucial to make this approach visible. One approach to make this visible is through labeling. Labeling is based on product attributes that allow consumers to evaluate the sustainability of the product. These product attributes are based on the three-pillar sustainable conceptualization: environmental (e.g., environmentally compatible usage of toxic chemicals, forgoing the usage of genetically modified organisms, saving energy, animal protection), social (e.g., Fairtrade), and economic (e.g., product quality and longevity) (Gerlach and Schudak 2010). Even though the increasing use of labeling by companies, consumers seem to be relatively unfamiliar with the different labels and their perceived perspective of them (Hanss and Böhm 2011). The need for eco-labeling was determined by the UN (United Nation) during the Rio Earth Summit (1992), and they identified it as being beneficial to encourage consumers to buy more sustainable fields (Rio Earth Summit, UN 1992). Later on, it was determined that, for reasons of trust and transparency, the task of labeling had to be transferred to third parties, like governments (Baker and Miner 1993). According to law, labeling is required. However, several studies indicate that consumers have a lack of trust in eco-labeling (Horne 2009). In a study conducted in 2006, two-thirds of the participants expressed a lack of trust in labeling from large corporations. As a result, this group believed that these companies did not prioritize ethics or morals (Lloyd 2006).

Therefore, it is of high importance to gain the trust of consumers on these sustainability claims. This can be done by emphasizing transparency, credibility, clarity, and consistency in sustainability claims and eco-labeling (Jain and Hyatt 2019; Kraft and Zheng 2021). Thereby, research shows that, next to the previously mentioned practices to gain consumer trust, there is a need to educate consumers on the importance of sustainability for them to build knowledge and therefore trust in the topic (Jain and Hyatt 2019). Research shows that significant consumer trust in corporate social responsibility has a positive effect on purchase intention and

willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products (Mudambi, Creary and Baker 2018). However, another study shows that this positive effect of eco-labeling only applies to hedonic products (products that provide pleasure and enjoyment). Thereby, the study claims that there is a negative effect of labeling for utilitarian products (products that have an exact purpose) (Verhoeven, Odekerken-Schröder and Hilhorst 2017).

Transparency, credibility, clarity, and consistency seem to be rather important when it comes to communicating sustainability to consumers (Jain and Hyatt 2019; Kraft and Zheng 2021). This leads to the question of why consumers are increasingly more driven to buy sustainable products. An elaborate study on functional, emotional, and psychological perceived consumer benefits of buying sustainable clothing shows that consumer behavior is based on six values, in chronicle order: self-expression, self-esteem, responsibility, protecting the planet, sense of accomplishment, and social justice. The same study found that these values are based on six different patterns. The first one is 'less buying', because of better and long-lasting quality, and a higher price than the average high street clothing item (premium price). Therefore, considering the product attribute of timeless cuts, sustainable fashion consumers generally want their clothes to last, and they want to reduce the number of clothes they buy. The second pattern considers 'the self', this consists of two parts, one being self-esteem and the other one being self-expression. Self-esteem is fulfilled through comfort and looking good. This is fueled by their own needs instead of the opinion of others, since, according to this study, they do not place great importance on looking good for others. Self-expression, on the other hand, is carried by individuality. Consumers want to differentiate themselves from their homogenous surroundings by adopting a unique style that motivates them to buy sustainable and more uncommon fashion. Furthermore, the third pattern regards 'health'. The researched consumers consider the use of natural materials in these sustainable clothes as leading to fewer health problems, especially regarding their skin, as sustainable brands tend to use fewer pesticides and chemicals in the

production process. The fourth pattern on which the previously named values are based is 'environment'. The study found that consumers place great importance on taking responsibility for the way they consume, particularly when the future family is considered. The next pattern considers 'accomplishments', participants of this study reveal enjoying the feeling of doing the 'right thing' and express the need for confirmation of having made the correct decision. The sixth and final pattern is about 'social justice' – this refers to the importance of equality and human rights of the workers in the factories and shops. Consumers place great concern on fair wages and working conditions. In general, the study's consumers uncover a feeling of being very connected to the world and the people in it. Therefore, they prefer purchasing products that use natural materials, environmentally friendly production techniques, and recycling, all this being brought out with social responsibility (Lundblad and Davies 2016; Jägel et al. 2012; McNeill and Moore 2015). We can state that most of these values and patterns are egocentric since most of them are self-fulfilling.

Another study substantiated these findings, it says that their respondents' motives appear to be egocentric and related to health instead of being the protection of the environment. Thereby, the study shows that a sustainable purchase constitutes a 'license to sin' whereby they relieve the guilt of non-environmentally friendly behavior. Another finding of the study is the slight motivator difference between North America and Europe. North American consumers are more motivated by self-expression to buy sustainable fashion, whereas European consumers are more so driven by status display. For these Europeans, the trend of buying sustainable fashion seems to be a new form of conspicuous consumption (Cervellon and Carey 2011). On the slight contrary, another systematic review of literature on consumer motivations for sustainable consumption shows that the most frequently cited motivation in 118 articles published between 1998 and 2018, is environmental concern. This is followed by health concerns and social influence. The two other identified motivations, 'personal values' and 'convenience' are less

frequently cited, but still play a role in consumer motivation (Siaves, Périer-Cornet and Kessous 2020). In addition, a meta-analysis of 40 studies on consumers' motivational drivers for purchasing green products identified five different motivators for consumers, being: environmental concerns, economic benefits, personal values, health concerns, and social norms. Again, this study stated 'environmental concerns' as being the strongest motivator, followed by economic benefits, personal values, health concerns, and social norms. The study refuted this by stressing that age, gender, education level, and income level are critical factors that influence motivational drivers. They conclude by emphasizing the importance of tailor-made marketing strategies to target specific consumer motivators (Chen, Wu and Hsieh 2019).

Multiple studies have revealed a dichotomy between motivations for purchasing sustainable products, highlighting a divergence between environmental and egocentric rationales. Following a study conducted in 2010, environmental concerns can be identified through two different dimensions, being: ecological awareness and environmental knowledge. Ecological awareness refers to the level of concern consumers have for the environment. The other dimension of environmental knowledge refers to consumers' understanding of environmental issues and their impact on the entire environment. A study on both dimensions concludes that they are positively related to the purchase of sustainable products, even though ecological awareness has a stronger influence than the other dimension (Fam, Shen and Li 2010). However, another study refutes this. They conducted an experiment in which they presented egocentric benefits and environmental benefits to the consumers. The messages with egocentric personal benefits of using sustainable products are more successful since consumers were more likely to choose the eco-friendly option compared to the messages with environmental benefits. These egocentric messages consist of health benefits or cost savings (Gal and Liu 2013). Ultimately, it is seen as important by research to mention both egocentric and environmental motivations in commercial communication. For example, campaigns that highlight the personal

benefits of eco-products may be more effective than those that solely focus on environmental concerns (Klößner 2013; Thøgersen 2012). In conclusion, it is of interest to delve deeper into the buying motivations of consumers regarding the specific to-be-researched market on which to act according.

### **3. Conclusion**

The literature review has provided valuable insights into the conceptualization of sustainability. Despite the substantial criticism that sustainability has received, this study has underscored its importance to companies. Empirical research has demonstrated that businesses are motivated to embrace sustainability due to motivations of competitiveness, legitimacy, and social responsibility. Conversely, this study has also explored the perspective of consumers on sustainability, revealing its growing significance. Consumers are showing heightened awareness of environmental and social concerns, and emerging research indicates that such awareness significantly influences their purchasing behavior, particularly among the Gen-Z demographic. Consequently, the findings of this study show that consumers' motivations to purchase sustainable products primarily stem from egocentric factors.

Prior research was about the definition of sustainability and how this is perceived by both corporates and consumers. For the purpose of this thesis it would be of interest to dive into the consumers' motivations for sustainable buying, considering the different outcomes of various studies on both egocentric and environmental reasoning. It would thereby be of interest to focus this elaborate research on a specific industry and target group. Furthermore, the extra willingness to pay on specific products by the target group, is also of interest to the thesis research.

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