

Green but trusted? Perceptions of Generation Z and Millennials toward sustainability claims in an emerging market: Evidence from Albania

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Sustainability claims have become a routine part of brand communication, yet their credibility remains uncertain in markets where independent verification is limited. This study examines how Generation Z and Millennial consumers in Albania evaluate sustainability communication from local brands, how perceived greenwashing relates to trust, and whether trust is associated with purchase intention. The study combines a consumer survey of 348 eligible respondents with semi-structured interviews with representatives of 15 Albanian firms which are engaged in sustainability-oriented practices. The measurement model was developed through confirmatory factor analysis. It showed that perceived greenwashing is better understood as two related but distinct dimensions: cue-based greenwashing, linked to misleading words and visual signals, and substantiation-based greenwashing, linked to vague or weakly evidenced claims. The findings show that environmental concern increases the perceived relevance and appeal of green communication, but favourable attention to such communication does not translate into stronger trust. Instead, green-communication relevance/appeal and cue-based perceived greenwashing are associated with lower trust in sustainability claims. Trust itself is not associated with purchase intention, which is shaped more by environmental concern and by the perception that green attributes signal quality and justify a premium. Generation Z emerges as more environmentally concerned, more attentive to green communication, more sceptical of greenwashing, less trusting, and still more willing to buy green products than Millennials. Interview evidence suggests that Albanian firms often use sustainability communication to aim for reputation, export readiness, and donor-supported business development, while certification and documentation remain costly and weakly rewarded domestically. The paper contributes evidence from a low-verification Western Balkan market and identifies why engaged young consumers may remain sceptical of the brands they nevertheless intend to buy from.

Keywords: green marketing; greenwashing; consumer trust; Albania; sustainability communication

1 Introduction

Environmental claims now appear on packaging, in advertising, and across the social media feeds of brands, in almost every consumer category. Green marketing has moved from a niche positioning strategy three decades ago to a routine element of brand communication [1] [2] [3]. In branding, environmental claims do more than describe a product's ecological performance. They also influence how consumers perceive the brand, how satisfied they are with it, and whether they regard it as trustworthy [4]. As such claims become more common, separating genuine environmental commitment from promotional rhetoric becomes increasingly difficult [5] [6] [7] [8]. Recent evidence suggests that trust, rather than awareness alone, constitutes a significant limitation to the effectiveness of green marketing initiatives.

Generational variation constitutes a salient dimension in the analysis of environmental attitudes and behaviours. Generation Z is frequently characterised as climate-aware and placing greater importance on brand accountability, while Millennials are identified as the cohort instrumental in mainstreaming sustainable consumption [9] [10] [11]. Direct comparisons between the two cohorts remain limited, especially in Albania and the Western Balkans. Some studies suggest that younger consumers express stronger pro-environmental intentions, while older groups may be more consistent in turning environmental values into behaviour [9] [12]. These divergences may reflect not only differences in the degree of environmental concern, but also cohort-specific modes of interpreting firm communications regarding environmental responsibility. Albania provides a useful context in which to examine this issue. The market is young and digitally active: internet penetration reached 88.4 percent and social media reached 61.1 percent of the adult population [13]. Generation Z and Millennials together account for approximately 894,000 people, or 37.8 percent of the resident population [14], which makes them a central consumer segment rather than a marginal audience. The firm side of the market is dominated by micro and small firms that often manage brand communication through social platforms [13]. The Albanian market still lacks consistent standards for environmental claims. This leaves consumers with limited means of assessing what firms say and widens the information gap between producers and buyers. Where formal certification is missing or difficult to access, consumers often rely on other cues, including trust in the producer, product origin, prior experience, and perceived quality [15] [16] [17] [18]. Environmental claims are therefore becoming easier to encounter than reliable evidence to support them. The study addresses three questions. First, how is environmental concern, green-communication relevance/appeal, perceived greenwashing, trust, and purchase intention related among Albanian consumers? Second, do Generation Z and Millennial consumers differ in their construct profiles or in the structural relationships among constructs? Third, how do Albanian brands describe the organisational conditions under which sustainability claims are produced and substantiated? The contribution is empirical and contextual. The paper tests whether a trust-centred model developed largely in mature markets holds in a low-

verification Western Balkan setting, and it links the consumer-side results to firm-side evidence from 15 brands.

2 Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Green Marketing Communication and Environmental Concern

Green marketing encompasses product, pricing, distribution, and promotional practices aimed at reducing environmental harm [1] [2] [3]. The communicative dimension remains the most visible and contested part of the field. The present study uses the narrower term green-communication relevance/appeal to capture whether consumers perceive brand messages about sustainability as informative, relevant, and appealing. Chen's green brand equity model adds that green brand image, green satisfaction, and green trust can contribute to green brand equity [4]. This perspective is useful here because Albanian consumers evaluate sustainability claims as brand cues, not as isolated pieces of information. Prior green-consumer research has repeatedly linked environmental concern to the attention consumers give to environmental messages and to their willingness to consider green products [19] [20]. Prior Albanian evidence similarly indicates that environmental awareness and message appeal matter for green purchase attitudes, while credibility contributes less consistently [15]. This supports the expectation that environmental concern will be positively associated with the relevance/appeal of green-communication.

H1. Environmental concern is positively related to green-communication relevance/appeal.

2.2 Greenwashing, Trust, and Purchase Intention

Greenwashing refers to misleading communication about a firm's environmental performance or about the environmental benefits of its products [5] [8]. It may appear through words, visual cues, vague claims, selective disclosure, or even the absence of verifiable evidence [6] [21]. Where regulation is weak, firms may face weaker pressure to substantiate claims, and on the other hand, consumers bear more of the burden of credibility assessment [5]. Trust is usually treated as the mechanism through which green communication becomes behaviour. Chen's green brand equity model situates the green trust within a broader brand equity system, alongside green brand image and green satisfaction [4]. Later trust-centred consumer models reveal that greenwashing has the potential to undermine green trust, while green trust supports green purchase intention [7] [8]. The trust-centred sequence therefore

remains a reasonable theoretical expectation, even if it may operate differently in markets where claims are weakly verified.

H2. Green-communication relevance/appeal is positively related to trust in sustainability claims.

H3. Perceived greenwashing is negatively related to trust in sustainability claims.

H4. Trust in sustainability claims is positively related to purchase intention for environmentally responsible products.

2.3 Generational Cohorts

Generational cohort theory proposes that people who come of age under shared social and historical conditions may develop durable commonalities in values and behaviour [22]. Applied to sustainability, the theory does not imply a simple hierarchy. Generation Z has grown up with climate change as an everyday issue and with sustainability content embedded in digital advertising. Millennials entered adulthood as sustainable consumption became more mainstream, but before the present saturation of branded green content [10] [11] [12] [23]. These different media and socialisation environments may produce two kinds of difference. The cohorts may differ in levels of concern, trust, scepticism, and intention. They may also differ in the strength of the relationships among communication, greenwashing, trust, and purchase intention.

H5a. Generation Z and Millennial consumers differ in their levels of environmental concern, green-communication relevance/appeal, perceived greenwashing, trust in sustainability claims, green quality-price association, and purchase intention. H5b. Generational cohort moderates the relationships among green-communication relevance/appeal, perceived greenwashing, trust in sustainability claims, and purchase intention.

2.4 Emerging-Market and Albanian Context

In mature and developed markets, consumers can sometimes rely on certification schemes, regulatory enforcement, and third-party ratings. In emerging markets such as Albania, these mechanisms may be weaker or less trusted, leaving credibility judgments to consumers themselves [5] [19]. Earlier Albanian SME work shows that brand-consumer interaction runs heavily through social platforms, with owners often managing communication themselves and having limited marketing capability [24]. Evidence from Albania and the Western Balkans shows that consumers do not always look first to technical labels when deciding whether a product is credible. They often place greater trust in where the product comes from, who sells it, their own experience with it, and its reputation for quality or health benefits [16]. Evidence from Albanian market also suggests, that consumers remain sceptical of brands' environmental claims and that domestic pressure on firms to validate their sustainability efforts is still limited [17] [18]. Demographic conditions may

therefore shape both concern and intention. Urban upbringing can increase exposure to environmental discourse and green communication, while household income is identified as affecting both affordability and the interpretation of green premiums [11] [19].

H6. Environmental concern and purchase intention for environmentally responsible products differ by place of upbringing and household income.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The tested framework links environmental concern to green-communication relevance/appeal, which is then examined in relation to trust in sustainability claims. Perceived greenwashing is also tested as a predictor of trust, following the CFA results that separated it into cue-based and substantiation-based dimensions. Trust is then examined in relation to purchase intention. Generation enters the analysis in two ways: first as a cohort profile comparison between Generation Z and Millennials, and second as a moderator of the model relationships. Place of upbringing and household income are treated as demographic grouping variables, while the green quality-price association is added in the extended purchase-intention model because green attributes may also operate as quality and premium-price cues in this market.

3 Method

3.1 Research Design

The study used a convergent mixed-methods design [25]. The quantitative strand tests associations among consumer perceptions, trust, and purchase intention. The qualitative strand examines the organisational conditions under which Albanian brands communicate sustainability. The two strands are integrated in the interpretation: the survey identifies the consumer response pattern, while the interviews explain why sustainability claims may be treated with caution.

Participation in this study was voluntary. Survey respondents and interview informants were informed about the purpose of the study, and prior consent was obtained. Responses were analysed anonymously, and no personally identifying information is reported. Because Albania is a small market and some firms are easily recognisable, interview evidence is reported by anonymised code, sectoral pattern, and aggregate count rather than by brand name.

3.2 Quantitative Phase: Sample, Procedure, and Measures

The survey was administered online in Albania in January 2026. The initial dataset had 441 records. The respondents unfamiliar with the concept of a green brand or unable to identify at least one Albanian green brand were excluded from the substantive sections, as were respondents outside the two target generational cohorts. The finalised eligible sample consisted of 348 respondents aged 18–45. Seven cases with missing item-level data on the retained measures were excluded from CFA and regression models, leaving 341 complete cases. Cohort membership was derived from reported age group rather than from the administrative COHORT field in the raw workbook. Respondents aged 18–24 and 25–29 were coded as Generation Z; respondents aged 30–36 and 37–45 were coded as Millennials, following Pew Research Center boundaries [23]. This produced 175 Generation Z and 173 Millennial respondents in the eligible sample, and 168 Generation Z and 173 Millennials in the complete-case analytical sample. All substantive constructs used five-point Likert scales anchored at 1, strongly disagree, and 5, strongly agree. Perceived greenwashing and trust were adapted from Chen and Chang [7] [8]. The environmental concern and purchase intention were adapted from Chan [19] and Maichum et al. [20], and the green quality-price association scale was developed for this study with reference to green perceived quality literature [26]. After CFA refinement, environmental concern was measured with EC1–EC5; green-communication relevance/appeal with PGM3–PGM4; cue-based perceived greenwashing with PGW1–PGW2; substantiation-based perceived greenwashing with PGW3 and PGW5; trust with TR1, TR3 and TR4; green quality-price association with GQP1–GQP3; and purchase intention with PI1–PI4.

3.3 Qualitative Phase: Brand Interviews

Between January and February 2026, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of 15 Albanian brands. All firms served Albanian consumers directly and were already engaged in sustainability practices or green communication. The brands were purposively selected because they aligned with the study's focus. It included a strong food and agro-processing component, several olive-oil and olive producers, two vegetable-pickle producers, one agro tourism case, one natural household-products case, one natural cosmetics case, one farm-to-table platform, and one dairy-processing case. Most firms were micro or small, family-run businesses. The interview guide covered motivations for sustainability communication, evidence behind claims, certification and documentation, perceived consumer scepticism, and the targeting of younger consumers. The qualitative archive contained company notes, thematic summaries, and translated interview excerpts. It was analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke [27]. Counts are used only to describe the presence of themes in this purposive sample, not to estimate population prevalence.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

Measurement quality was assessed using CFA, Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, composite reliability, AVE, and HTMT [28] [29] [30] [31]. Models were estimated using maximum likelihood. The initial six-factor model fit poorly, and perceived greenwashing split into two dimensions. The revised model therefore included seven factors: EC, PGM, PGW-CUE, PGW-SUB, TR, GQP, and PI. Three factors had only two indicators, so findings related to them should be interpreted with caution.

Multi-group CFA was used to assess cohort measurement invariance. Configural and full metric invariance were tested across Generation Z and Millennials. Since full metric invariance did not meet the strict change-in-fit criteria, scalar invariance was not interpreted and cohort comparisons are reported as observed-composite profile differences rather than as latent mean differences [32] [33]. Hypotheses were then tested with composite scores rather than full structural equation modelling because the revised structure was exploratory and included several two-item factors; this approach also facilitated the inclusion of controls, interactions and robustness checks. Results are therefore interpreted as associations among composite measures, not causal effects among latent constructs.

H1–H4 were tested with standardised regression models using complete cases.

H3 was divided into H3a, addressing cue-based greenwashing, and H3b, addressing substantiation-based greenwashing; the extended purchase-intention model added environmental concern and green quality-price association. VIFs assessed collinearity. Cohort profile differences were tested with independent-samples t-tests, moderation with mean-centred interaction terms, and demographic differences with t-tests and one-way ANOVA. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Common method variance was assessed with Harman's single-factor test on the retained 21 items. The first unrotated factor explained 26.1% of the variance, below the commonly used 50% threshold. Although not conclusive, this result suggests that the measures are unlikely to be accounted for by a single response factor.

4 Results

4.1 Sample Profile

Among the 348 eligible respondents of the survey, 173 were female, 173 were male, and two did not disclose their gender. Generation Z accounted for 175 respondents and Millennials for 173. Most respondents reported an urban place of upbringing ($n=253$; 72.7 percent). The sample was relatively educated and digitally active, potentially reflecting the online recruitment strategy. Household income was skewed toward higher bands, with 180 respondents reporting monthly household

income¹ above 200,000 ALL, 96 reporting 130,001-200,000 ALL, 60 reporting 90,001-130,000 ALL, and only 12 reporting 50,001-90,000 ALL.

4.2 Measurement Model

The initial 25-item six-factor CFA did not meet acceptable fit standards ($\chi^2=1037.28$, $df=260$, $\chi^2/df=3.99$, CFI=.830, TLI=.803, RMSEA=.094, SRMR=.110). Item diagnostics indicated that the broad perceived greenwashing construct separated into two dimensions, while several items reflected similar but empirically distinct content. So the final 21-item seven-factor model fit the data substantially better for this study ($\chi^2=419.90$, $df=168$, $\chi^2/df=2.50$, CFI=.938, TLI=.923, RMSEA=.066, SRMR=.070)

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Initial 25-item 6-factor CFA	1037.28	260	3.99	.830	.803	.094	.110
Final 21-item 7-factor CFA	419.90	168	2.50	.938	.923	.066	.070
Configural invariance across cohorts	539.33	336	1.61	.939	.924	.042	.075
Full metric invariance across cohorts	601.00	357	1.68	.927	.914	.045	.091

Note. N = 341 complete cases. Cohort was recoded from age group. Since full metric invariance was not supported under strict change criteria, scalar invariance was not interpreted.

Table 1
CFA model fit and measurement invariance

Most constructs showed acceptable reliability and convergent validity. The exception was PGM, which remained the weakest construct because it was measured with only two items and its AVE fell slightly below the recommended .50 threshold. For this reason, PGM is interpreted as reflecting the relevance or appeal of green communication rather than the broader concept of green marketing communication. Retaining the two-indicator factors was a pragmatic choice. They produced a better-fitting and more focused solution, but their limited coverage calls for caution and further testing with broader measures. Discriminant validity was examined using HTMT. All HTMT values were below the .85 threshold, with the highest value found between EC and PGM (HTMT = .676), supporting the distinction between the retained constructs.

¹ Income categories are reported in Albanian lek (ALL). As an indicative reference, EUR 1 $\approx$ ALL 94 according to the Bank of Albania official exchange rate during the study period.

Construct	Items	λ range	α	ω	CR	AVE	M (SD)
EC	EC1-EC5	.540-.950	.849	.858	.858	.558	3.99 (.68)
PGM	PGM3- PGM4	.649-.745	.652	.655	.655	.488	4.17 (.71)
PGW-CUE	PGW1- PGW2	.662-.862	.713	.739	.739	.591	3.99 (.77)
PGW-SUB	PGW3, PGW5	.724-.935	.805	.821	.821	.699	4.02 (.69)
TR	TR1, TR3, TR4	.767-.995	.867	.917	.917	.789	2.97 (.54)
GQP	GQP1- GQP3	.508-.941	.826	.846	.846	.661	3.41 (.72)
PI	PI1-PI4	.732-.933	.893	.904	.904	.704	4.69 (.48)

Note. N = 341 complete cases. λ = standardised CFA loading; α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's omega; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Omega and CR were derived from the same standardised congeneric CFA solution and should not be read as independent corroboration. PGM is retained as a narrow two-item relevance/appeal measure and should be interpreted cautiously, while PI shows a ceiling risk.

Table 2.
Reliability, convergent validity, and descriptives for retained measures

4.3 Descriptive Evidence and Correlations

The descriptive statistics show high environmental concern among respondents ($M = 3.99$) and very strong purchase intention ($M = 4.69$), while trust remained noticeably lower ($M = 2.97$). Scores for both perceived-greenwashing dimensions were also close to 4.0, pointing to a generally sceptical reading of sustainability-related claims. The correlations followed the same pattern. Environmental concern was positively associated with green-communication relevance/appeal (PGM; $r = .507$, $p < .01$), the green quality–price association (GQP; $r = .303$, $p < .01$), and with purchase intention (PI; $r = .239$, $p < .01$). Statistics showed that trust moved in the opposite direction: it was negatively associated with PGM ($r = -.234$, $p < .01$) and cue-based perceived greenwashing (PGW-CUE; $r = -.228$, $p < .01$). The data show that its association with purchase intention was weak and not statistically significant ($r = -.058$).

4.4 Hypothesis Tests

Environmental concern was a positive predictor of green-communication relevance/appeal ($\beta = .507$, $p < .001$), explaining 25.7 percent of the variance. H1 is supported. The trust model did not follow the expected sequence for trust-building. Green-communication relevance/appeal was negatively associated with trust ($\beta = -.172$, $p = .003$), so H2 is not supported. Cue-based perceived

greenwashing was also negatively associated with trust ($\beta = -.162$, $p = .004$), supporting H3a. Substantiation-based perceived greenwashing was not significant ($\beta = .001$, $p = .980$), so H3b is not supported. With place of upbringing and income added as controls, the negative associations for PGM ($\beta = -.140$, $p = .020$) and PGW-CUE ($\beta = -.152$, $p = .008$) remained significant, whereas the controls were not. Collinearity was low in the controlled trust model, with all VIF values at or below 1.32. H4 was not supported, as the findings reveal that trust was not significantly associated with purchase intention ($\beta = -.058$, $p = .284$). In the extended model, this result remained unchanged as trust once more showed no significant effect ($\beta = .006$, $p = .911$). In contrast, findings show both environmental concern ($\beta = .205$, $p < .001$) and the green quality-price association ($\beta = .116$, $p = .036$) were positively associated with purchase intention. Overall, the model accounted for 6.9% of the variance, and collinearity was not a concern, with all VIF values at or below 1.25. Given that purchase intention was already close to the upper end of the response scale, the absence of a significant trust effect should be interpreted as a finding specific to this sample rather than as evidence that trust has no role in purchase decisions more broadly.

Hyp./model	Path or test	Result	Decision
H1	EC $\rightarrow$ PGM	$\beta = .507$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .257$	Supported
H2	PGM $\rightarrow$ TR	$\beta = -.172$, $p = .003$	Not supported; negative
H3a	PGW-CUE $\rightarrow$ TR	$\beta = -.162$, $p = .004$	Supported
H3b	PGW-SUB $\rightarrow$ TR	$\beta = .001$, $p = .980$	Not supported
H4	TR $\rightarrow$ PI	$\beta = -.058$, $p = .284$, $R^2 = .003$	Not supported
Extended PI	TR, EC, GQP $\rightarrow$ PI	TR: $\beta = .006$, $p = .911$; EC: $\beta = .205$, $p < .001$; GQP: $\beta = .116$, $p = .036$; $R^2 = .069$	EC and GQP significant
H5b	Cohort interactions	All focal interactions n.s.	Not supported
H6	EC and PI by upbringing/income	EC: $p = .018$ / $< .001$; PI: $p = .233$ / $.069$	Partially supported

Note. $N = 341$ complete cases for all analyses. β = standardised coefficient; n.s. = not significant. For H6, the first p -value refers to place of upbringing and the second to household income. H5a is reported separately in Table 4.

Table 3.
Hypothesis-test summary

4.5 Cohort and Demographic Findings

H5a is supported at the observed-composite level. Generation Z scored higher than Millennials on environmental concern, the relevance and appeal of green communication, both dimensions of perceived greenwashing, the association between green quality and price, and purchase intention. Millennials scored higher on trust. The largest differences were observed for environmental concern, PGM, and cue-based perceived greenwashing. These effect sizes are unusually large for consumer research and therefore require cautious interpretation.

These differences emerged in the survey data but should not be generalised to all Albanian consumers in either generation. They may partly reflect the sample itself, including the green brand-awareness screening, online recruitment, and the age cutoffs used to define the cohorts. Because full metric invariance was not established, the results are treated as differences in observed response patterns rather than definitive differences in the underlying constructs.

Construct	Gen Z M (SD)	Millennial M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
EC	4.50 (.44)	3.50 (.48)	20.16	<.001	2.18
PGM	4.66 (.38)	3.70 (.64)	16.89	<.001	1.82
PGW-CUE	4.37 (.64)	3.62 (.69)	10.34	<.001	1.12
PGW-SUB	4.15 (.68)	3.89 (.67)	3.48	<.001	.38
TR	2.84 (.54)	3.10 (.52)	-4.44	<.001	-.48
GQP	3.68 (.67)	3.14 (.67)	7.38	<.001	.80
PI	4.79 (.25)	4.59 (.61)	3.81	<.001	.41

Note. Complete-case cohort counts: Gen Z n=168, Millennials n=173. Positive Cohen's d values indicate higher Gen Z scores.

Table 4.
Cohort profile differences

H5b was not supported. Cohort did not significantly moderate any of the focal relationships in either the trust model or the extended purchase-intention model. The two cohorts therefore differed more in their average scores than in the way the variables were related to one another. The post-hoc power analysis showed about 75% power to detect small interaction effects and almost complete power to detect medium-sized effects. These findings provide reasonable confidence that no moderate differences in the structural relationships were present, although smaller differences may have gone undetected. The results should therefore not be taken to mean that the underlying mechanisms were identical across cohorts. In the mean-centred moderation models, VIF values remained below 10, although they were higher than those observed in the main regression models. The highest VIF was 7.53 in the trust model and 5.13 in the purchase-intention model.

H6 was partially supported. Environmental concern was higher among respondents with an urban upbringing than among those with a rural upbringing ($M = 4.05$ vs. 3.86 ; $t = 2.38$, $p = .018$, $d = .28$). It also differed significantly by household income, with the highest concern in the lower income bands and the lowest concern in the highest income band ($F = 12.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .099$). Purchase intention did not differ significantly by upbringing ($p = .233$) or by household income ($p = .069$). The inverse income pattern is consistent with national evidence that sustainability-compatible behaviour in Albania is often strongest among financially constrained households, a pattern described as green by necessity rather than green by affluence [18].

4.6 Organisational Perspectives from Brand Interviews

The interview findings offer additional context for interpreting the survey results. Consumers' caution toward environmental claims appear consistent with what firms reported during the interviews. All firms indicated that they had adopted sustainability-related practices, yet only six out of fifteen actively communicated those efforts. As a result, many sustainability initiatives remain largely invisible to consumers because they are not supported by clear, verifiable communication. The interview evidence revealed a consistent gap between sustainability practice, substantiation and communication. All 15 firms reported sustainability-related practices and consumer scepticism, managed their social media internally, regarded green branding as costly in a domestic market unwilling to pay more, considered consumer education necessary, and reported no concrete government support. Yet only 6 firms actively promoted their green practices. 5 firms used solar panels, but only 2 communicated this fact. Certification was rare, with only 1 firm already certified, while all 5 firms engaging third parties for ISO or certification were export-related. 4 firms were not convinced that green practices or their promotion generated commercial returns. Finally, 11 firms reported that visits to shops, sites or production facilities reduced consumer scepticism, indicating that direct experience can partly substitute for formal verification.

4.6.1 Sustainability as reputation and market access

The company notes indicate that firms use sustainability as a reputational cue in the domestic market and as an access requirement in external markets. Export transactions are especially important: the firms engaging third parties for ISO or certification were the firms linked to export activity. One olive oil producer explained the sequence plainly: *“We had no idea. Once we made contact with the export market we understood immediately that without communicating sustainability we could not break in. We changed the packaging, added a QR code on the label that leads to the website. Without an external expert we would not have known; we cannot be professionals in everything. What we know is how to make good olive oil”* (February 2026). The engaged firms in this study show that the

documentation of sustainability appears to be pulled by buyers and external partners rather than pushed by domestic consumers.

4.6.2 Substantiation constrained by cost and capability

The interviews also highlighted the practical challenges that local firms face when communicating sustainability. While participants generally recognised the value of green communication, many described certification, documentation, professional marketing, and claim verification as expensive and difficult to sustain. Across all 15 cases engaged, social media platforms were managed internally, most often by the owner or another family member rather than a marketing specialist. Certification was repeatedly mentioned as a particular obstacle. As one producer explained, *“The certifications of our products require a lot of knowledge of regulatory framework, skilled people and a lot of money; we have neither of those. And in the Albanian market, holding a certification does not mean your product sells at a higher price”* (January 2026). These accounts suggest that sustainability claims may outpace the systems needed to document and verify them, particularly in small firms with limited or no marketing and compliance resources.

4.6.3 Scepticism as a market condition

All 15 firms engaged in this study reported consumer scepticism. This scepticism was linked not only to environmental claims but also to broader experiences with product quality, adulteration, and exaggerated market promises. One olive oil producer connected scepticism to concrete local market experience: *“Consumers have faced many bad experiences in the Albanian market; people have bought final product with blended other oil, and I do not blame them. We try to show them our laboratory analyses, but even there, we notice scepticism. These cases have gone public in media”* (January 2026). Eleven of the fifteen firms reported that visits to the shop or production facility helped reduce customer doubts and often encouraged these customers to recommend the business to others. What emerges from these interviews is that trust is earned through transparency and first-hand experience rather than through general sustainability claims.

4.6.4 Generational differences observed but not systematically tracked

Formal data are not collected by any of the interviewed companies on generational differences, but interviewees repeatedly observed that younger consumers tended to pay more attention to websites, online ratings, packaging, traceability, and other visible signs of product credibility than other generations. They described Millennials as more price-sensitive and more likely to consider a quality justification before accepting a premium. A producer summarised the distinction in terms that mirror the survey result: *“Strangely, the young consumer associates green with both a higher price and higher quality, while the more mature ones associate it more with a higher price they do not much want to pay. A more mature*

generation, like 50 years up, they have more fixed ideas is difficult to change or convince them” (February 2026). This aligns with the finding that Generation Z combines strong green interest with lower trust and a stronger green quality-price association.

5 Discussion

The results qualify the standard trust-centred model rather than simply confirming it. Environmental concern was clearly associated with the relevance and appeal of green communication, but favourable attention to such communication did not build trust. On the contrary, PGM was negatively associated with trust. This finding should be interpreted carefully because the retained PGM measure is short and borderline, but the negative direction is consistent with evidence from other Central and South-Eastern European settings where environmental communication, scepticism and distrust may coexist rather than follow a simple persuasion sequence [34] [35]. In low-verification markets, closer attention to green communication may expose consumers to claims they cannot independently verify.

An important finding is that the two dimensions of perceived greenwashing behaved differently. Cue-based greenwashing, related to misleading words and visual signals, was negatively associated with trust. Substantiation-based greenwashing, related to vague or weakly evidenced claims, did not independently predict trust once PGM and cue-based greenwashing were included. One possible interpretation is that Albanian consumers respond more strongly to visible promotional cues than to the absence of formal evidence, especially in a market where weak substantiation may already be common.

Trust was not associated with consumers' purchase intention in this study. This should not be read as a rejection of trust theory. Purchase intention for green brands is close to the scale ceiling, limiting the explanatory variance. The findings suggest that, among consumers already aware of green brands, purchase intention is driven more by environmental concern and quality-price perceptions than by brand trust. Consumers may want to purchase green products while still doubting the claims around them.

The cohort evidence is the clearest substantive contribution, but it should not be overstated. Albanian Generation Z is not simply more environmentally concerned. It is also more responsive to the retained relevance/appeal items, more likely to perceive both types of greenwashing, less trusting, more likely to connect green attributes with quality and price, and more willing to buy green products. The green quality-price result is consistent with recent evidence that green consumption may serve as a status or distinction signal for the brand among younger consumers [36]. However, the cohort effect sizes are unusually large, especially for environmental concern and green-communication relevance/appeal. Because full metric invariance

was not supported, these gaps are treated as observed profile differences rather than as latent mean differences.

The income results require the same caution. Lower-income respondents in this sample reported stronger environmental concern, yet this does not mean that the domestic market supports green price premiums that easily. National evidence suggests that many sustainability-compatible behaviours in Albania are resource-saving practices which are mainly shaped by financial constraints rather than by lifestyle consumption [18]. The present results therefore separate two phenomena: engagement with marketed green claims, where Generation Z is most attentive and sceptical, and necessity-driven sustainable practice, which may be stronger among older or financially constrained consumers.

The qualitative findings help explain why this credibility gap exists. The interviewed firms reported sustainability-related practices, but evidence production, certification and professional communication remain costly, while domestic consumers do not reliably reward substantiation through higher prices. Verification is often pulled by export markets rather than domestic demand. The credibility gap is therefore structural as well as communicative.

For firms, the implication is direct: more green communication alone is unlikely to strengthen trust. Credibility depends on verifiable information, such as QR-code traceability, documented production processes, independent verification where feasible and clear explanations of production methods. For policymakers and business-support institutions, the findings point to the need for accessible verification systems, practical guidance for small firms and consumer education. Certification alone is not enough if consumers do not understand or trust how it was obtained. Without more transparent and understandable substantiation, consumers will continue to rely on their own judgement, making it difficult for genuinely green firms to stand apart from weak or unsupported environmental claims.

Conclusion

This study examined how Generation Z and Millennial consumers in Albania respond to green and sustainability claims made by local brands. Using survey data from 348 consumers and interviews with representatives of 15 firms, the paper shows that Albania is an emerging green-brand environment but also a low-trust communication environment. The revised CFA-based measurement model distinguished between cue-based and substantiation-based perceived greenwashing, allowing a more precise interpretation of how consumers evaluate sustainability claims.

The main finding is that environmental concern is positively associated with green-communication relevance/appeal, but this attention does not translate into stronger trust. Instead, green-communication relevance/appeal and cue-based greenwashing are negatively associated with trust. Trust itself is not detectably associated with purchase intention, which is more closely linked to environmental concern and to the perception that green attributes signal quality and justify a premium.

Generation Z appears as the more engaged but also more sceptical cohort: it reports higher concern, stronger purchase intention, higher perceived greenwashing and lower trust than Millennials. These findings should be read in light of the study's constraints. The sample was non-probabilistic and digitally active, with urban and higher-income respondents more strongly represented.

The measurement model still has its limitations. PGM was captured with only two items, and the two greenwashing dimensions need to be tested with a broader set of indicators. Some of the retained items also warrant further validation. Full metric invariance was not established, so the cohort results reflect observed response patterns rather than latent mean differences. The cross-sectional design and the use of self-reported purchase intention warrant caution, especially given that responses were clustered near the top of the scale. The model should now be tested with probability or panel samples, in other Western Balkan markets, and through behavioural or experimental studies that examine whether clearer evidence behind sustainability claims can rebuild trust.

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