



HEALTHY IN THEORY, INDULGENT IN PRACTICE: EXPLAINING THE GEN Z BEVERAGE CONSUMPTION PARADOX IN AN EMERGING MARKET

Tolipov Saidkhuja Nuriddin o'g'li

Leading Specialist, Central Registry and Exam Unit (MDIST)

Abstract

Generation Z is frequently portrayed as the most health-conscious consumer cohort, characterised by heightened awareness of nutrition and long-term wellbeing (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Dwidienawati et al., 2020). Paradoxically, however, high-sugar beverages remain present in their consumption patterns. This study examines this contradiction using survey data from 120 Generation Z consumers in Uzbekistan, an under-researched emerging market context. Although respondents reported strong concern about sugar intake and recognised associated health risks, these attitudes showed limited influence on actual consumption behaviour, particularly in social settings. Correlation and regression analyses revealed that health consciousness was not a significant predictor of reduced sugary beverage consumption, whereas social consumption contexts were positively associated with higher intake. These findings challenge the assumption that Gen Z's health awareness consistently translates into behavioural change. The study introduces the concept of contextualised health dissonance, suggesting that health values coexist with socially legitimised indulgence. This contributes to consumer behaviour theory by highlighting the situational and cultural limits of health-driven consumption among young consumers.

Introduction

Generation Z has become a focal point in contemporary marketing and consumer research. Raised in a digital era marked by increased access to health information, environmental awareness, and lifestyle self-optimisation, this



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cohort is often described as more health-conscious than previous generations (Williams & Page, 2011; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Studies indicate that Gen Z consumers show greater concern about ingredients, sugar intake, and long-term health consequences, influencing demand for healthier product alternatives (Dwidienawati et al., 2020). Within the beverage sector, this trend has contributed to the belief that Gen Z is driving a shift away from traditional sugary soft drinks toward low-calorie and functional beverages (Euromonitor, 2022). Health consciousness is therefore frequently treated as a stable predictor of consumption behaviour. However, emerging evidence suggests a more complex reality. Sugary beverages continue to play a visible role in Gen Z consumption, particularly in social settings such as gatherings, celebrations, and shared meals (Batat, 2019). This contradiction raises an important theoretical question: Do Gen Z's health attitudes genuinely reshape consumption behaviour, or do they coexist with established social and cultural practices that sustain indulgent consumption? Consumer behaviour research has long documented an attitude-behaviour gap, where individuals express strong pro-health or ethical values but fail to consistently act in accordance with them (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrington et al., 2010). While such inconsistencies are often explained through situational constraints or habit, less attention has been paid to the role of social context in shaping when health values are activated or suspended. This gap in understanding is particularly relevant in collectivist emerging markets, where food and beverage consumption is deeply embedded in hospitality norms, social bonding, and shared rituals (Hofstede, 2001; Warde, 2016). In such contexts, indulgent products may carry symbolic meanings that outweigh individual health considerations. This study addresses this research gap by examining the relationship between health consciousness and sugary beverage consumption among Generation Z consumers in Uzbekistan. The research asks: Why do Gen Z consumers who express strong health concerns continue to consume sugary beverages, and what does this reveal about the limits of health-driven consumer behaviour?

By providing empirical evidence from an under-researched cultural setting, this study contributes to consumer behaviour theory and introduces the concept of



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contextualised health dissonance, where health values and indulgent practices coexist in socially legitimised contexts.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between health attitudes and sugary beverage consumption among Generation Z consumers. Survey methods are widely used in consumer research to capture perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported behaviours across defined populations (Bryman, 2016).

Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected from 120 Generation Z respondents aged 18–26 in urban Uzbekistan. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, a common approach in exploratory consumer research within emerging markets where comprehensive sampling frames are unavailable (Etikan et al., 2016). The survey was administered online, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

The questionnaire included Likert-scale items measuring:

- Health consciousness (concern about sugar intake, attempts to consume healthy products)
- Perceived health risks of sugary beverages
- Frequency of sugary beverage consumption
- Consumption context (individual vs social situations)

Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), alongside behavioural frequency questions.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. These methods allowed examination of whether



health consciousness predicted lower sugary beverage consumption and whether social context influenced behaviour (Field, 2018).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Respondents demonstrated high awareness of health issues, with the majority agreeing that excessive sugar intake can negatively affect wellbeing. Despite this, reported consumption of sugary beverages remained frequent, especially in social situations such as gatherings and celebrations.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation results indicated a weak negative relationship between health consciousness and sugary beverage consumption, suggesting that stronger health concern was only slightly associated with lower intake. In contrast, social consumption context showed a positive relationship with higher reported consumption.

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis showed that health consciousness was not a statistically significant predictor of reduced sugary beverage consumption. However, consumption in social contexts was associated with higher reported intake. These findings provide quantitative evidence of an attitude-behaviour gap in health-related beverage consumption (Sheeran & Webb, 2016).

Discussion

The findings challenge dominant narratives that position Generation Z as consistently health-driven in their consumption behaviour. While health awareness appears strong at the attitudinal level, behaviour remains shaped by situational and social factors. This supports prior research indicating that personal values do not always translate into consistent action (Auger & Devinney, 2007).

This study extends existing theory by proposing contextualised health dissonance. Unlike traditional cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957),



where conflicting beliefs and behaviours cause psychological discomfort, contextualised health dissonance suggests that consumers compartmentalise values depending on context. Health is prioritised in individual decision-making situations, but indulgent consumption becomes socially acceptable in shared settings where relational and symbolic meanings dominate (Belk, 1988).

These findings highlight the cultural dimension of the attitude-behaviour gap. In collectivist environments, social harmony and participation in shared rituals may override individual health motivations (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, Gen Z's health consciousness does not eliminate indulgent behaviour but instead reshapes when and where it occurs.

Conclusion

This research challenges the prevailing narrative that Generation Z represents a uniformly health-driven consumer cohort. While attitudinal commitment to health appears robust, actual consumption behaviour reveals significant nuance, shaped by situational and social contingencies. The introduction of contextualised health dissonance offers a novel theoretical lens that extends cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) by recognising that consumers strategically compartmentalise values across different contexts. Health priorities dominate in individual decision-making scenarios, yet indulgent consumption gains legitimacy in social settings where relational bonds, group rituals, and symbolic meanings take precedence (Belk, 1988). This framework reveals the attitude-behaviour gap as less a psychological inconsistency and more a culturally mediated negotiation between personal aspirations and collective norms.

The cultural dimension emerges as particularly salient in collectivist contexts, where social harmony and participatory rituals often supersede individual health motivations (Hofstede, 2001). Among Gen Z consumers, health consciousness does not eradicate indulgence but reconfigures its timing, location, and social acceptability. These findings resonate with prior work showing that personal values do not consistently translate into action (Auger & Devinney, 2007), while advancing theory by specifying the mechanisms and cultural moderators at play.



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Practical Implications

For marketers and public health practitioners, these insights carry actionable implications. Health-promotion campaigns targeting Gen Z should move beyond messaging that appeals solely to individual health benefits, instead addressing the social contexts where indulgent choices flourish. Strategies might include:

- Socially integrated health messaging: Framing healthy choices as enhancing group experiences (e.g., "shared wellness moments" rather than solo discipline).
- Context-specific interventions: Designing portion-controlled or lower-calorie indulgent products for social occasions, maintaining sensory pleasure while aligning with health values.
- Digital community building: Leveraging Gen Z's social media affinity to normalise health-conscious indulgence within peer networks.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides robust evidence from [your methodology/context, e.g., Uzbekistan/Asia-Pacific Gen Z consumers], its cross-sectional design limits causal inferences about dissonance resolution over time. Future research could employ longitudinal designs or experimental manipulations to test how contextual cues influence health-indulgence trade-offs. Additionally, comparative studies across individualistic versus collectivist cultures would test the generalisability of contextualised health dissonance. Finally, exploring how digital social contexts (e.g., Instagram food-sharing culture) amplify or mitigate this phenomenon would extend these insights into Gen Z's increasingly virtual social lives.

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