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# How does digital media engagement influence sustainability-driven political consumerism among Gen Z tourists?

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## ABSTRACT

Digital media encourages the engagement of younger generations in civic life and increases their political consumption. Using a lifestyle politics perspective as a theoretical lens and situated in literature on political consumerism and consumer sustainable behaviour, this study demonstrates how digital media engagement drives the construction and mobilization of political consumerism among a Gen Z cohort in a developing country context. A qualitative analysis illustrates how digital media enables sustainability-driven political consumerism. Digital media and social media networks reinforce engagement in tourism-related boycotting and buycotting behaviors as expressions of political consumerism among Gen Z'ers. A novel framework indicating a spectrum of digital political consumerism that divides activism behaviors into spectator, transitional, and gladiatorial activities is developed. This study highlights that GenZ interest in political and ethical consumption is not just a Western practice although political consumerism varies between and across societies, cultures and politics. By applying the tenets of lifestyle politics theory, the study enriches the literature by providing a grounded generational understanding of tourists' ethical consumption as a political practice. The study offers recommendations for understanding ethically and politically motivated consumption behaviours and practices of a young traveler cohort.

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Political consumerism; digital activism; boycott; buycott; Gen Z; sustainability; lifestyle politics theory

## Introduction

Many consumers bring their political, environmental, and civic concerns to the global marketplace by avoiding certain products or deliberately seeking out others (Cheng et al., 2022; Copeland & Boulianne, 2022). Such a situation highlights the need for businesses, government and other stakeholders, such as interest groups, to recognize the importance that customers place on corporate social responsibility and other societal challenges (Boulianne, 2022; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Political engagement has evolved over time, with more people choosing more 'expressive and personalized forms of participation' that reflect their political or moral concerns

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trying to change business practices (Boström et al., 2019; Copeland & Boulianne, 2022). Such publicly motivated consumption, referred to as 'political consumerism', has become an important form of civic activism and political engagement. Political consumerism includes the related acts of boycotting (punishing businesses or services for unfavorable behavior) and buycotting (or reverse boycotts which support businesses or services exhibiting desirable behavior) (Boström et al., 2019; Boulianne et al., 2022; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013) which have increasingly become a concern in tourism (Lamers et al., 2019; Seyfi et al., 2021a; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a; Shaheer et al., 2019).

The concept of political consumerism in tourism refers to the desire or refusal to travel to a destination or attraction or use the services of particular companies in order to generate social, environmental, or ethical change (Seyfi et al., 2021a; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a). Although scholarly interest in political consumerism has increased in other fields (e.g., Boström et al., 2019; Boulianne, 2022; Boulianne et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022; Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), there is limited empirical research in a tourism context. This is surprising as existing studies suggest that tourism can be a significant arena for political consumer activism because of destination, business and/or product elements (Gretzel, 2017; Seyfi et al., 2021a, Yousaf et al., 2021; Shaheer et al., 2019). For instance, tourists have used travel boycotts to express ethical concerns (Lovelock, 2012). However, decisions not to travel to a destination or consume a product may remain a personal ethical choice unknown to others. Instead, it is the connection between the purchase decision and letting others know that makes the consumption decision an act of overt political consumerism.

The current stream of research on digital media and tourism has not adequately addressed political consumerism, with much of the extant research overlooking digital media use and engagement in the construction and mobilization of political consumerism in relation to sustainable tourism (Lamers et al., 2019). While interest in this area is growing, the literature still lacks a nuanced examination of the role of individual forms of activism in relation to sustainability that are increasingly facilitated by digital and social media engagement.

Another major gap in the literature is a scarcity of empirical studies on how digital media influences the construction and mobilization of political consumerism among younger consumers, particularly the Gen Z cohort who are often portrayed as 'socially and environmentally conscious' tourists (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019; Walters, 2021). Gen Z makes up 32% of the world's population and is the largest generational consumer group (Bloomberg, 2018). Their influence and spending power are growing, especially in the tourism and hospitality industries (European Travel Commission, 2020). Previous studies suggest that younger people with technology skills are more likely to engage in political consumerism and especially sustainable and ethical consumerism which distinguishes them from previous generations (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Robichaud & Yu, 2021; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019).

Research on political consumerism has mainly focused on developed countries, with little research conducted in developing countries. This may be because, as Saarinen (2021) argues, ethical consumerism is substantially rooted in neoliberal forms of tourist consumption, with the notion of the primacy of the individual in consumption practices (Hall, 2016). Although citizens of developing societies are often portrayed as victims of globalized markets and trade inequalities, their role as conscious consumers has received greater attention given the growth of a substantial middle class (Gregson & Ferdous, 2015). Prior research has underlined the need for investigating perspectives of ethically driven consumption in different cultures (e.g. Ariztia et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2022; Sun, 2020). Scholarship also affirms that everyday practices of ethical consumption discourses and lifestyles are influenced by socially and culturally rooted institutional settings (e.g. Ariztia et al., 2018). This research focuses on Iran, which arguably, despite economic and political difficulties, has a growing new middle class and a large increase in young people's engagement in digital activism as a result of advances in Internet and mobile technologies and online platforms (Faris & Rahimi, 2015; Salehi et al., 2021). For instance, estimates indicate that

65% of Iranians over the age of 15, 55 million out of the country's 85 million population, have accounts on the main social media platforms (Dursun, 2021).

Drawing on lifestyle politics perspectives as a theoretical guide, and grounded in political consumerism and consumer sustainability behaviour literature, the primary goal of this paper is to empirically examine the role of digital media engagement in the construction and mobilization of sustainability-driven political consumerism in tourism among Gen Z cohort. To meet this goal, this exploratory research adopted qualitative methods using semi-structured interviews with a selected sample of participants representing the Iranian Gen Z cohort of travelers. The findings of this study offer significant theoretical and practical insights on digitally-mediated political and sustainable consumption behavior of Gen Z.

## Literature review

### *Conceptualizing political consumerism*

Political consumerism refers to the expression of political beliefs and ethical values via the purchase of goods or services (Boulianne, 2022; Stolle et al., 2005). Referring to these behaviors as 'individualized collective actions' because they are motivated by notions of both 'self-interest' and the 'common good', Micheletti (2010) defined political consumerism as "... actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices" (p.2). Boström et al. (2019) emphasized the societal implications of the "market-oriented engagements" associated with consumption (p.2). Although political consumerism can take different forms (see table 1), research mostly focuses on boycotts and buycotts (Micheletti, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Whereas boycotts punish companies for undesirable behavior, policies, or business practices, buycotts (or reverse boycotts) reward companies for desirable behavior or favorable policies and business practices.

For political reasons, individuals may minimize their energy use, utilize public transportation, pursue a meat-free lifestyle, or engage in boycotting and buycotting (De Moor, 2017). De Zúñiga et al. (2014) suggests that political consumerism is strongly connected with civic engagement, which includes activities that address societal concerns that are beneficial to the well-being of society, and highlights that the notion of what constitutes the 'political' in political consumerism may therefore be broadly interpreted and depend on the positionality of who is employing the term.

Viewing political consumption as closely linked to civic engagement also presents intriguing considerations about its connection to digital media. Previous research has shown relationships between digital and social media and political consumerism (Boulianne, 2022; Boulianne et al., 2022; De Zúñiga et al., 2014; Lee & Fong, 2021) and with consumers being more likely to participate in political consumption if they engage in connective activities (e.g., social media) (Becker & Copeland, 2016; Kelm & Dohle, 2018). However, relatively little is known about such relationships in a tourism context especially the extent to which younger generations online engagement translates into tourist political consumption behaviour, in particular, with respect to sustainability.

### *Digital media and the construction of political consumerism*

Digital media has contributed significantly to the construction of political consumerism (Lee & Fong, 2021) as the Internet has expanded its reach as an everyday means of communication (Copeland & Boulianne, 2022). Consequently, digital media, particularly social media, has made it easier for engaged consumers to express discontent and individual beliefs resulting in the emergence of new forms of online global social movements (also known as cyberactivism, Internet activism, or clicktivism) (Carty & Onyett, 2006). Digital media is essential for promoting

**Table 1.** Different forms of political consumerism.

Form of political consumerism	Definition	Examples
Boycott	Refuse to purchase or use a product or service, or take part in an activity as a way of expressing strong disapproval of a policy or practice	Refusal to travel to a destination or attraction or use the services of companies
Buycott	The deliberate purchase of products or services and destination selection as an act of conscious consumption to demonstrate approval of policies or practices	Purchasing at cafés that sell fairtrade coffee and/or organically labeled food, and generally better for the environment (e.g., ecolabels)
Discursive	Opinion formation and communicative actions expressing reflective and critical views held by individuals and/or collectivities on corporate and destination policies, corporate practice, and consumer culture.	Antibranding and culture jamming, e.g., the animal activist Kentucky Fried Cruelty, concern over human rights
Lifestyle	A decision to use one's private life sphere to inform about and attempt to change established production and consumption practices.	Vegans, freegans, and downsizers; slow travel and staycations

Sources: After Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Boström et al., 2019; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a.

contemporary tourism businesses and destinations, but also exposes them to tourist and interest group driven political and social marketing (Gretzel, 2017; Mknono, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2021a).

Empirical studies have reported the interrelationships between digital media use and engagement and construction of political consumerism. Gotlieb and Cheema (2017) suggested that in generating online material that enables interaction with other like-minded people, certain consumers participate in political consumerism as a representation of lifestyle politics. In the USA, De Zúñiga et al. (2014) reported that people who use social media are more likely to engage in political consumerism and posited that political consumption and social media have a 'networked character', echoing the findings of Earl et al. (2013) and Kelm and Dohle (2018) who noted that the intensity of online communication influences political consumerism activity.

Stolle and Micheletti (2013) and Kelm and Dohle (2018) also argue that online shopping promotes political consumerism. Those involved in political consumerism obtain knowledge on corporate practices via the digital media, and through social media can exchange information about goods, brands, and ethical consumption (De Zúñiga et al., 2014). Social media use also allows individuals with similar interests and/or identities to build 'imagined communities' in which information exchange and encouragement in political participation occurs (Becker & Copeland, 2016).

In a tourism context, Lamers et al. (2019) noted that there was a growing relationship between political consumerism and sustainable tourism, a point also picked up by Seyfi and Hall (2020a), with both noting social media as an avenue of political and economic pressure on businesses and destinations. Similarly, according to Shaheer et al. (2018), the development of new technology, particularly social media platforms, has been one of the most important drivers for recent boycotts, a role also identified by Stadlthanner et al. (2020) in promoting pro-sustainability behaviours. Seyfi et al. (2021a) examined the drivers and barriers affecting tourists' engagement in digitally mediated consumer activism. They reported that the main drivers of boycott participation were self-enhancement, perceived egregiousness, creating change, awareness, and personal proximity to the boycott cause. Seyfi et al. (2021a) concluded that digital media technologies are both information sources and mediators of consumer ethical activism and they suggested that boycott participation could be interpreted as more of a continuous practice than one-off participation. Actual or potential tourists may therefore use the Internet and digital tools to address ethical concerns and attempt to effect change by boycotting or buycotting to encourage more sustainable forms of tourism (Hall, 2016; Lamers et al., 2019; Mkonon, 2018; Seyfi & Hall,

2020a). This echoes the observation of Mkono (2018) that tourism research “has not yet caught up with the role of cybermovements” (p.1609) and highlights the need for research on tourists’ sustainability-driven political consumerism.

### ***Political consumerism and sustainability through the lens of Gen Z***

Although there is no clear consensus, Gen Z also known as ‘postmillennials’, ‘iGens’ or ‘centennials’, include those born in the digital era (between the late 1990s and the late 2000s (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). In many countries this is the first generation to grow up in a digital world where they live online and interact virtually with their favorite brands (Bloomberg, 2018). For Haddouche and Salomone (2018, p.69), the Gen Z cohort is therefore “a new sociological category, nourished by the information technologies, the internet and the social networks”.

This generation’s behavior is regarded as differing from that of previous generations, leading to changes in consumer behavior (Bloomberg, 2018; Budac, 2014). Gen Z’ers grew up in a more connected world than previous generations and have shown greater connectivity with sustainable and ethical consumerism which influence their tourism choices as a way of expressing their identity (Valentine & Powers, 2013). Budac (2014) suggests that Gen Z’ers are environmentally conscious and cognizant of environmental impact and carbon footprint of products. Several studies have investigated the link between generations and sustainable consumption behavior (e.g., Bulut et al., 2017; Sidique et al., 2010), including in the tourist industry (e.g. Haddouche & Salomone, 2018).

Several studies suggest that Gen Z rejects brands and embrace products as part of a more sustainable lifestyle (Valentine & Powers, 2013). According to First Insight (2020), Gen Z is more willing to pay more for sustainability (73%) in comparison to Millennials (68%), Generation X (55%) and Baby Boomers (42%). Compared to earlier generations, Gen Z is more interested in incorporating sustainability into their behaviors and practices (Lazányi & Bilan, 2017). Similarly, Green Match (2020) indicate that Gen Z is more prepared than previous generations to refuse to buy from businesses that do not suit their standards, even boycotting them. The continuation of such behaviors would have significant implications for business practices, especially as Gen Z will soon become the world’s biggest customer market if it isn’t already (Green Match, 2020). The Masdar Gen Z Global Sustainability Survey (Masdar, 2016) suggests that Gen Z view consumption through an ethical lens and are prepared to boycott companies which are not sustainable. Their findings indicate that Gen Z’ers are aware of the world’s environmental problems, and believe that poverty, inequality, and unemployment are similarly critical issues for which they are looking to business and governments to respond. Such awareness and potential to shift consumption behaviours clearly means that businesses may need to incorporate sustainability into their business models, including in the tourism sector (Lim & Lemanski, 2020). Yet, there are no empirical studies in tourism on political consumerism behaviour of Gen Z’ers. This points to one of the key gaps this study seeks to fill.

### ***Theoretical framework: Lifestyle politics theory***

This study is guided by lifestyle politics theory. This theory refers to “the politicization of everyday life, including ethically, morally, or politically inspired decisions” (De Moor, 2017, p.181) and suggests that that political and ideological beliefs are closely associated with consumption decisions (Bennett, 2012; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Lifestyle politics therefore relate to a person’s choice with respect to ‘dress, diet, housing, leisure activities, and more’ (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 4) in their “private life sphere to take responsibility for the allocation of common values and resources, in other words, for politics” (Micheletti & Stolle, 2011, p.126). This echoes the description of political consumerism by Cheng et al. (2022) as when “individuals disconnect from the

institutional construction of identity and enjoy the freedom to construct their lifestyle, identities, and social networks” (p.4).

Lifestyle politics refers to the practice of ‘politicizing the personal’ in which individuals perceive the political significance of their daily consumption choices and adjust them to express their political views and effect political change (Bennett, 2012; Shah et al., 2007; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). By using the market as a venue to express political and moral concerns (Shah et al., 2007), political consumerism is understood as a form of political participation that embodies the practice of lifestyle politics. Boycotting and buycotting are forms of lifestyle politics and lifestyle-based, informal mobilizations in which individuals avoid traditional politics to demonstrate their support for political concerns, such as environmental preservation, sustainable development, fair trade, or ethical practices, through their individual purchasing decisions (Boulianne, 2022; Cheng et al., 2022).

Given its ubiquity, digital media use is central to contemporary lifestyle politics (Boulianne, 2022; Boulianne et al., 2022; Lee & Fong, 2021). Social media platforms are used by people to engage in civic life with digital media consumption viewed as a significant predictor of socially conscious consumption (Keum et al., 2004). Bennett and Segerberg (2013) drew on lifestyle politics to argue that digital media are central to the organization and conduct of collective action because they reduce information and communication costs and promote expressive and individualized forms of involvement. Lifestyle politics theory therefore provides a framework for linking the broad societal changes to concerns of many tourists, especially the politicized personal behaviors of younger travelers. Thus, this theory is deemed a suitable framework for the present empirical investigation which aims to explore the role of digital media engagement in driving Gen Z’ sustainability-related political consumerism.

## **Research method**

### ***Research design***

Given the exploratory nature of this study, an interpretive research paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2009) is adopted to investigate Gen Z cohort of travelers’ political consumption behaviours in the digital arena. In accordance with the objectives of the study, a qualitative research methodology was chosen because it provides richer and more in-depth information for exploring highly personal and contextualized political and consumer perspectives, thereby enabling a better initial understanding of the problem and identify phenomena and attitude influences (Hennink et al., 2020; Maxwell, 2009).

### ***Data collection***

The study sample consisted of Gen Z cohort respondents. The participants were recruited using a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling. A snowball sampling technique was initially used to select suitable participants in accordance with the aims of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Those first contacted were invited to recommend others who would be willing to be interviewed. This sampling technique was deemed most appropriate to attain a purposive sample suitable for this study (Hennink et al., 2020). Initial contact to request an interview was made via email and messages on various social networks (e.g. LinkedIn, Instagram, and Telegram) with an explanation of the purpose of research, the criteria (aged 18-24 with prior familiarity with boycotting and buycotting in relation to tourism) and requested availability for a remote interview via Whatsapp, Skype, Teams, or Zoom. Those that answered positively were contacted to discuss the interview’s format. It has been acknowledged that the use of new Internet technologies as a research medium in qualitative studies is more conducive for some hard-to-reach and geographically dispersed groups (Hanna, 2012) as well as for



politically-sensitive research (Lawrence, 2022). The use of such a method is increasing among researchers, representing a valid alternative to face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). To maintain confidentiality, acquiring informed consent and building trust, respondents were informed at the outset that their perspectives would be used only for research purposes (Kaiser, 2009). Codes were used instead of participant names allowing participants to remain anonymous. Because participants were selected based on their age and willingness to participate, a non-probability purposive convenience sample was used (Hennink et al., 2020). To comprehend the uniqueness of the investigated phenomena and its context, qualitative research tends to focus on small and focused samples related more to the phenomena of interest than to demographic characteristics (Maxwell, 2009). Saturation was reached at 36 interviews (19 males and 17 females) whereby the last interview did not provide new insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample size was adequate for the purpose of this study and for qualitative research studies in general, since it was big enough to make valuable conclusions about any underlying behavioral patterns and small enough to for effective in-depth analysis (Saunders et al., 2009).

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data, but the conversation remained flexible and open-ended (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview guide was developed based on previously discussed literature (e.g. Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Neilson, 2010; Seyfi et al., 2021a; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a). Prior to the main phase of interviews, a pilot interview with five participants was conducted to assess legibility and content relevance to the study's research questions, as well as to determine if there are any flaws in the interview design, or if specific questions need to be modified prior to implementation of the study (Maxwell, 2009). The interview guide included different questions meant to elicit information about the participants' boycotting and buycotting experiences. The questions were open-ended to elicit more spontaneous opinions and prevent the possibility for bias that may result from confining responses to the researcher's predetermined categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hennink et al., 2020).

The interviews started with introductory questions on digital and social media use: "Which media do you mostly use?", and "how do you expect digital and social media may affect your political consumption engagement?". These behaviors included the frequency with which respondents' read or follow tourism-related campaign information or 'post boycott or buycott campaign information'. They were also asked whether they followed a variety of social groups on social media, such as environmental groups, NGOs and cultural organizations. Subsequently, respondents were asked on their prior participation in tourism-related boycotts and buycotts. To measure boycotting, respondents were asked 'During the past 12 months, have you refused to buy, or boycotted, a destination, a tourism attraction, certain product or service because of the environmental, social or political concerns?'. The participants were then asked to provide actual and concrete examples to illustrate their descriptions. To get deeper meaning, follow-up questions asked: "Can you explain more and give an example?" "How do you plan to do that in future?".

The qualitative interviews lasted around 50 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted in Persian and then back translated into English by the lead author to ensure consistency in meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2009). At the conclusion of each interview, participants were given the chance to provide any additional comments or information that may enrich the study.

### **Data analysis**

In line with the interpretive research paradigm qualitative, thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a beneficial technique for interpretivist researchers who want to get a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To guide data analysis, the five steps of analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used

(familiarization of the researcher with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes). The interviews were read and transcribed. Then, they were read and re-read several times to narrow down the number of codes. Finally, they were read again and put into groups with identifiable themes.

To ensure methodological trustworthiness, a set of procedures recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used. First, throughout the data collecting and analysis process, all statements were evaluated as equally relevant and assumptions were avoided by considering inconsistencies and discrepancies in experiences and perceptions. Second, information was provided to interviewers to ensure accuracy during data collection, and the transcribed documents were returned to the participants to ensure that their thoughts and opinions were correctly understood and analyzed, and to confirm specific facts. Third, the initial codes and transcripts were also reviewed by three tourism researchers to ensure that codes are applied consistently throughout the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Morse and Richards (2002) suggest, at this point of a study, researchers often want to have their results validated by another team member, or it is also conceivable to check findings with an independent individual who may critically analyze the original findings. Lastly, we avoided presumptions and accepted frameworks while actively exploring for differences and contradictions between the participants' personal views and understandings of political consumerism.

## Findings and discussion

The analysis of interviews indicated that exposure to media coverage of a particular boycott or buycott call works as a stimulant that generates a desire for more knowledge and awareness on a subject. Such awareness can resonate with an individual's personal ethical and political positions, leading to acts of political consumption. The analysis of interviews indicated that Gen Z had varying levels of engagement in digital activism in regard to political consumerism. Three forms of digital activities in relation to sustainability-driven political consumerism emerged, which are characterized as 'spectator', 'transitional', and 'gladiatorial' behaviors (see Figure 1), are discussed in more detail below.

### *Stimulus*

#### *Exposure to digital media information*

The analysis of interviews revealed that digital information sources play a crucial role in the initial political consumption decision. This reflects the observation of Earl et al. (2017) that the Internet and social media provide consumers with the most recent information about boycotts and buycotts. This also echoes the findings of Cheng et al. (2022) that exposure to news media positively influences individuals' political participatory behavior through supplemental communicative processes. The vast majority of respondents in this study were influenced by social media platforms which raised awareness about a particular campaign or issue (Boulianne et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Seyfi et al., 2021b). For example:

Many of my boycott choices have been made via social media. Most of the boycott campaigns I learned about on social media were very helpful, and I can find out more about them before I decide to join them (Interview #9).

When I was surfing on Instagram, I saw a campaign on boycotting travel to Turkey... This campaign talked about what happened to Iranian tourists in Turkey and how bad the Turkish police treated them. I shared the post my page and in our family's telegram groups (Interview #14).

This indicates that social media serves as both an information source and communication channel (Earl et al., 2013; Seyfi et al., 2021b). The communication capabilities of social media allow individuals to express their political opinions and engage in political discussions with

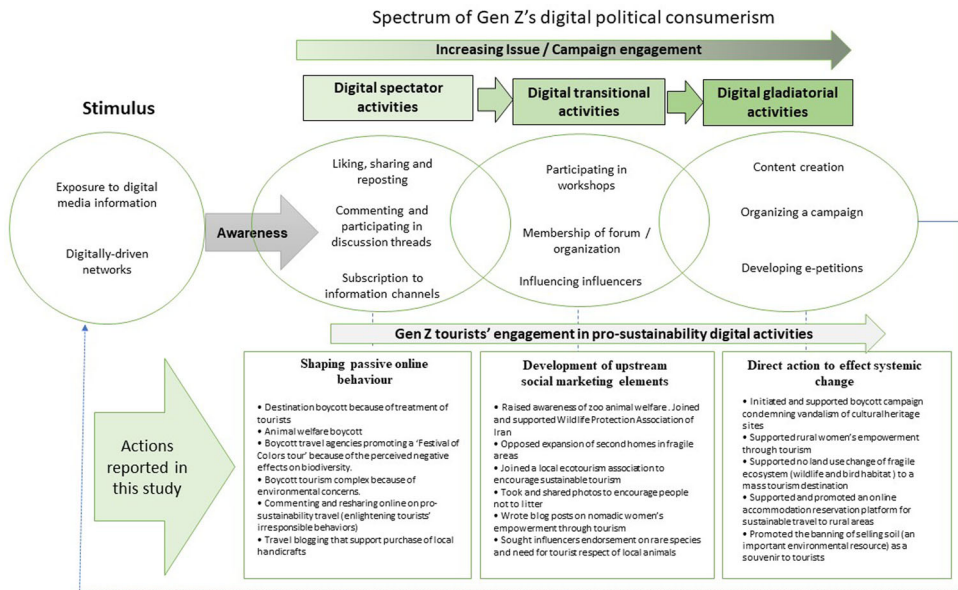


Figure 1. Spectrum of Gen Z's sustainability-driven digital political consumerism.

online peers. The social environment of social media platforms is highly connected with political engagement (Boulianne et al., 2022; Kelm & Dohle, 2018). In addition to facilitating participation requests, social media also provides information as to why individuals should support certain campaigns. Receiving information from social media and online news can also act as a form of reinforcement and can encourage further political discussion and expression. For example, one of the interviewees commented:

I saw a campaign against tourists' bad behaviour at turtle nesting sites in Qeshm Island on Instagram... I started posting about it on social media to raise awareness of animal cruelty by tourists in the island, and many people commented on my post which then led to a hot debate (Interview #6).

Our findings also corroborate the argument that exposure to political information through social media has a greater impact on political consumption than exposure via family and friends (Boulianne et al., 2022; De Zúñiga et al., 2014; Lee & Fong, 2021). Cheng et al. (2022) found that media exposure influences the political consumerism behavior of individuals through an online communicative process via social media-based political expression and discussion. Becker and Copeland (2016) also argued that the usage of social media enables individuals to connect and interact with others who have similar interests and identities, therefore creating a networked public that can be mobilized to participate in campaigns. A situation echoed by other studies (e.g. Boulianne et al., 2022; Kelm & Dohle, 2018). These findings are supported by lifestyle politics theory which posits that people form their meaning system around their immediate social networks through social media and these platforms provide avenues for individuals to communicate with one another and shape civic engagement practices that may channel an individual's voice into large-scale political actions (Cheng et al., 2022).

### Digitally-driven networks

The analysis of interviews showed that social ties to online groups help create awareness and mobilize people to participate in political consumerism activities. Online campaign groups promote calls to action and participation. By sharing content with their members and followers,

online groups may also encourage those people to learn about ethical consumption and political consumerism issues. The respondents mentioned that some news about how Iranian tourists are treated in countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia was largely spread via the Internet. This led to launch of a campaign to 'Boycott travel to pro-ISIS countries' (Alef, 2016). The campaign initially advocated 'Stop unnecessary travel' 'Stop buying goods' from countries that have mistreated Iranian tourists, such as Turkey (Alef, 2016).

I am a member of many Telegram groups in which members exchange information about the good and poor practices of various destinations... when there was a discussion over the mistreatment of Iranian tourists in Turkey, I joined the boycott campaign since there were a large number of individuals in those Telegram groups who supported a travel boycott to Turkey (Interview #12).

I heard the news through the Telegram and Instagram that people were asked to travel domestically and spend money inside our country instead of traveling to Turkey and being disrespected ... I remember it was much discussed... I strongly agree, why should we go to a place where it is possible to be disrespectful from the very beginning ... I had tried to at least inform family or friends who want to go to other countries about the consequences of their trip (Interview #4).

Our findings strengthen the observation that political consumerism has a networked character (De Zúñiga et al., 2014). This is also supported by lifestyle politics theory that views political consumerism as a lifestyle decision influenced by peer pressure and commentary in one's social network (De Zúñiga et al., 2014). As 'central organizing agents of connective action' social networking platforms facilitate the "formation of flexible weak-tie social network and a large-scale self-motivated personal political expression" (Cheng et al., 2022, p.4). Online communities are created based on common identities and interests facilitate the creation and joining of civic and political groups (Becker & Copeland, 2016) which may lead to the formation of a collective identity and a rapid scale-up of the political action (Cheng et al., 2022). Associational involvement has been discussed as stronger predictor of boycotting and buycotting. Because they are more likely to be requested to engage, those with stronger organizational links are more inclined to do so (Schussman & Soule, 2005). As Putnam (2000) states, social capital shaped in online communities fosters trust and facilitates contacts with other citizens, offers knowledge and encourages civic and political participation. As was mentioned by a respondent:

We have a Telegram group comprised of hundreds of tourism students and researchers. In this group, different issues related to tourism are often discussed. I trust the information shared in this group rather than the Internet which is always full of fake news (Interview #29).

### ***Continuum of digital political consumerism***

The formation of awareness due to the exposure to digital media information and social ties in online communities result in varying degrees of political consumerism substantially shaped in digital environments. The study of interviews revealed a spectrum of digitally mediated political consumerism comprising of three forms of digital activism behaviors; 'spectator', 'transitional', and 'gladiatorial' which are addressed below.

#### ***Digital spectator activities***

These activities include commentating and participating in discussion threads on social media, liking, sharing and reposting, and subscribing to channels. The analysis of interviews showed that digital spectator activities constitute the majority of digital activism's acts and attracts the most participants. Such digital spectator activities are a limited form of participation in political consumerism (George & Leidner, 2019; Majchrzak et al., 2013).

**Liking, sharing and reposting.** Interacting on social media in the form of liking, sharing or reposting is one of the most popular passive forms of digital activism and reflect only limited engagement in a political consumer issue. Some of the respondents experienced a specific boycott campaign, the 'My Heart Beats for my Heritage' campaign (Financial Tribune, 2015) initiated by a group of environmentalists and tour leaders and led by a tourism training institute to 'Promote Responsible Tourism in Badab-e Soort (Financial Tribune, 2015) (a natural site in Mazandaran Province in northern Iran) that faced significant damage inflicted by tourists. They mentioned:

A few years ago, I went to Badab-e Soort. I didn't know anything about how important this natural site was back then. I didn't follow any of the rules for a responsible trip to this sensitive site, to be honest, not just me, but none of the other people I was with did that. But when I saw the news about this campaign on the Internet by accident, I learned a lot. It showed me in a very real way how to visit in a responsible way. I now search about the places I want to see before I go. If I come across anything on how to be a responsible tourist, I always share it on social media and talk about it with those around me (Interview #26).

Some of the respondents also talked about a campaign that targeted travel agencies promoting a 'Festival of Colors tour' (Mojnews, 2018) because of the perceived negative effects on biodiversity. They mentioned that:

I noticed a page on Instagram where tour guides asked their followers not to go on these trips that some travel agencies were advertising. I was actively sharing these posts that were against travel agencies advertising such tours (Interview #21).

**Commenting and participating in discussion threads.** Posting comments on discussion threads on social media platforms is one of the other most popular forms of user participation with comment and debate spaces are the most common ways for users to interact on social media platforms. Several interviewees had followed the discussion on a tourism complex known as 'domes holiday village' on the island of Hormoz that was subjected to a boycott by domestic tourists because of environmental concerns. One of the respondents commented:

I remember there was a hot debate about this tourism complex on both in Telegram groups and on Instagram. From the discussion on these forums, I learned how such accommodation should be environmentally-sensitive, sustainably-built and that local people should be actively involved.... I followed these topics very enthusiastically and showed my participation when I had to comment or ask questions (Interview #8).

For some respondents, conversations on social media networks about this tourism complex occurs because although they do not dare to openly discuss this issue in public, they may express their opinions more freely on social media platforms. As one respondent commented:

People weren't happy with the builders of this candy-coloured accommodation and others involved in this project because they were able to build this kind of tourism spot on the sensitive areas such as the coast of the island without any problem and in total violation of the environmental law... The boycotters hardly dare to voice such displeasure in public and instead can easily share their view on social media platforms (Interview #17).

**Subscription to information channels.** Some of the respondents also mentioned that they subscribe to newsletters or channels promoting sustainable travel tourism in Iran. For example, one of the respondents mentioned that:

I noticed on Instagram a page on how to be a responsible traveller. In the page, there were many videos about the tourists' irresponsible behavior and vandalism historical sites. I followed this page and subscribed to the channel to get more updates on what they share for being a responsible traveler (Interview #3).

I follow the news shared by travel bloggers that support purchasing local handicrafts... I subscribed to the channels of these travel bloggers to get more information and videos about how to support local people while we travel (Interview #16).

The role of digital spectator reflects only limited engagement in a political consumption issue and can be regarded as indicating either an initial or casual involvement in campaigns or issues (George & Leidner, 2019; Majchrzak et al., 2013). In this stage digital engagement becomes a means to learn about an issue, either with (commenting and participating in discussion threads, sharing, and reposting) or without (subscription) direct discussion with others. This stage therefore indicates a shift from general issue awareness to a conscious decision to learn more about a campaign or sustainable tourism issues. Although political learning can occur through online discussion the first elements of issue-activism may also emerge as individuals shift from a role of passive consumption of information to looking to influence or support others in their viewpoints. The next stage of involvement, that of digital transition, links political consumerism more with membership of campaign groups.

### ***Digital transitional activities***

The analysis of interviews shows that the digital activities of some respondents take the form of forum membership, workshop participation and getting influencers to promote specific marketing and communication perspectives on issues. Compared with spectator activities, these activities show more formal involvement in campaigns being enabled by digital platforms and media.

### ***Membership of forum/organization.*** One of the respondents mentioned:

I used to go to the zoo, and it was clear that the animals were not happy there, but I didn't know how to help. Then I decided not only to stop going to zoos, but also to talk to everyone about how other animals are mistreated while people are there. After that, I joined the Wildlife Protection Association of Iran and regularly go to their meetings (Interview #24).

### Another respondent mentioned:

I went on a trip to Mazandaran; you can't believe there were many thousands of second homes and local people were not happy at all. After we returned from the trip, I and [others] wrote an article about this in a newspaper to inform other people about the massive growth of second homes in fragile areas of Mazandaran... We also joined a local ecotourism association to encourage sustainable tourism in this province (Interview #32).

### ***Writing blog posts.*** Some of the respondents mentioned that they have created their own blogs and websites to inform others about unsustainable tourism practices. For example:

When I went on a tour ... I saw many people do not respect the nature and drop litter ... I took some photos and write a story about this on my website to inform about this behavior and encourage people not to litter (Interview #2).

In my blog, I often write about women's empowerment through tourism ... I recently wrote a post about women making and selling dolls to tourists in a nomadic rural community (Interview #5).

### ***Influencing influencers.*** Some of the respondents approached the influencers and other activists to endorse and share their post. For example, this was commented by one of the respondents:

In my trip to Qeshm with my family, our tour guide talked to us about rare species in this island. After that, I watched a documentary about these species such as turtle and learned how harmful regular interactions of tourists can be with the animals. The first thing I did was make a video and send it to several environmental activists and asked them to inform me about this (Interview #18).

... we joined an off-road tour to Kavir-e Lut in the south-east corner of Iran ... I shared some photos of this trip on Instagram and many people commented on my post that off-roading is harmful to the environment, damage to vegetation and affect soil erosion ... I was embarrassed that I had proudly shared photos. A friend suggested me to contact some travel bloggers and through them inform about the negative impacts of popular off-roading trips (Interview #22).

The above comments made by the respondents indicate that conversations on social media platforms may influence individuals' perspectives on ethical issues and their intentions to participate in boycott or buycott activities. With the information flow throughout the network and the networked social effect, people are more likely to be notified of the most recent buycott or boycott activities and participate in collective actions (Lee & Fong, 2021). The transitional stage therefore reflects far more engagement with an issue either in terms of membership of an organization in which digital media provided a capacity to be involved more with similarly minded people as well as overtly using online channels as a means of trying to influence the course of a campaign. The use of blog posts indicates a desire to personally influence other people's positions, while attempts to influence the influencer indicates a very politically sophisticated understanding of the role of digital media in issue-attention relations that may be likened to a form of online political entrepreneurship (Wry et al., 2011). The transitional stage therefore indicates the development of upstream social marketing elements in an attempt to influence the course of a campaign (Hall, 2016). Significantly, such online political consumer engagement may also contribute to the development of an individual's collective identity related to a campaign issue,

### ***Digital gladiatorial activities***

Gladiatorial contests include direct action to make change. These activities have the potential for major impacts on society, governments, and organizations (George & Leidner, 2019). This includes creating content and publishing them on social media platforms, organizing campaigns with the intention of convincing their networks or influencing the views of peers.

***Content creation.*** Some participants in this study commented that they make content on social media networks to inform people about how some tourists harm the environment and cultural heritage sites. For instance:

I learned about the concept of vandalism via a post of my friend on Instagram... I noticed that some of vandals harm the monuments and cultural sites... From then, I devoted much of travel posts to vandalism and its consequences... I try to advertise sustainable travel behaviors as much as I can by producing content on negative consequences of vandalism (Interview #22).

As a tour guide, I have seen many women in rural communities that live with the money generated via tourism... I interviewed some of these micro entrepreneurs in these communities and created a documentary about women's empowerment through tourism (Interview #27).

***Organizing a campaign.*** There was a campaign on social media to support the non-land use change of Miankaleh Peninsula (situated on the southeastern Caspian Sea in northern Iran) to mass tourism destination. One of the respondents mentioned:

Before the plan to change Miankaleh's land use was widely talked about on Instagram, I didn't know anything about it or how important it was as Iran's most important bird watching site. Many environmental activists were against this plan. I did some research and found out how important this place was, both for ecotourism and as a place for wildlife and bird habitat... After that, I became one of the people who created and backed this campaign (Interview #10).

Several interviewees talked about a campaign that supported an online accommodation reservation platform in Iran named Jabama that launched a special campaign for all those interested in sustainable travel to southern Iran (Jabama.com). One of the respondents who was an organizer of this campaign mentioned that:

Because of [COVID-19], many rural areas in the south of Iran that were highly dependent on tourism were very severely impacted. We launched this campaign to help the revival of tourism in these destinations (Interview #33).

**Developing e-petitions.** Organization of campaigns may also involve the use of e-petitions. For example, a respondent mentioned that:

I did not think that the soil of Hormoz was an important environmental resource, but with the news I read on Instagram, I realized many tourists visiting this island buy the soil of this island as a souvenir... I decided to write several articles in newspapers and warned about the effects of selling soil as souvenirs... with the help of some friends, we launched a petition boycotting selling such souvenirs to tourists (Interview #31).

The final stage of the continuum of digital political consumerism, that of gladiatorial activities, demonstrates the over direct involvement of individuals in creating content for use in campaigns or even initiating campaigns themselves. As such they shift from being a supporter to being an organizer of online political activities as their issue involvement deepens. Significantly, respondents indicate that they perceive the main location for contestation to be online space, given that they see this as the best medium by which to influence government and industry actions with respect to tourism. As such, this stage can be interpreted as a clear example of upstream social marketing in order to modify not just individual and business practices but also look for more systematic change by seeking to change or modify government decisions (Hall, 2016).

## Conclusion and implications

Drawing on lifestyle politics theory and grounded in political consumerism and consumer sustainability behaviour literature, this study investigated how digital and social media engagement influence Gen Z tourists' political consumerism in relation to sustainability. Importantly, this study examined how digital and social media use matter for political consumerism in a tourism context, and how different digital activism is shaped. Utilizing social media promotes the consumption and transmission of information as well as the establishment of group links that might assist involvement in boycott and buycott initiatives. While it has been shown that social networks also have a significant impact in openly political conduct, our research corroborated previous findings about the relationship between social networks and consumption when examined through the lens of social media. Internet information searching is increasingly significant for lifestyle political consumption (Boulianne, 2022; Earl et al., 2017; Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017; Seyfi et al., 2021a). Additionally, digital media usage allows people to interact with organizations, which may generate possibilities to learn about and engage with social media groups and enhance involvement in organization-driven events.

The insights obtained through the semi-structured interviews identified three different forms of engagement namely spectator, transitional, and gladiatorial activities that were provided into a framework which indicates a spectrum of digital political consumerism that shifts from passive, issue learning activities at one end to campaign startups at the other. As such, the framework provides a means to chart individual behavior and shows the characteristics of activities in each category and their effects in relation to issue and campaign involvement. While traditional activism depended heavily on the number of participants, a smaller number of digital activists may have a significant influence due to the efficiency made possible by technology in protests that can be immediately responsive to a target's actions. Nevertheless, engagement and trying to influence others remains an important part of digital activism and suggests a continuing role for digital media in community-based political consumerism which is the level at which many of the sustainable tourism issues that respondents engaged with function.

This study also emphasized that age appears to be associated with digital political consumerism and Gen Z'ers tend to have the greater technical skills demanded at the higher levels of the digital activism. However, the target of their activism does appear to be multi-generational in terms of information provision and trying to encourage issue learning, although direct discussion, e.g., on discussion forum, has a much more limited generational base. In terms of the



nature of change required, much of the tourism related issues tend to concern local political consumer space, and reflect only limited system change, i.e., looking to change a decision, rather than the system that led to that decision. Nevertheless, several campaigns that Gen Z'ers in this study were engaged in also showed aspects of a desire for more systemic change.

The findings of this study offers several theoretical and empirical insights into the interrelationships among digital media engagement, political consumerism and consumer sustainable consumerism and their connection to upstream social marketing. Overall, this study offers several contributions to scholarship:

*First*, the findings corroborate the role of digital and social media use and engagement in constructing political consumerism in sustainable tourism. By focusing on political consumerism, important evidence is added on little studied forms of political action in a tourism context. This study offers a novel framework that shows a spectrum of online political consumerism from a relatively passive, learning mode, to one in which there is very direct engagement with issues in terms of organizing campaigns and seeking to influence the trajectories of business and government decision-making in sustainable tourism. Thus, this research contributes to literature on political consumerism in a tourism context.

*Second*, although broadly noted in tourism-related boycotts research, digital participation in pro-sustainable political consumer activity is an understudied topic in tourism. Despite Hall's (2016) recognition of the potential importance of sustainable tourism related upstream social marketing and the role of online communication for tourism, there is limited research on tourism-related digitally-driven political consumerism. This research extends understanding of how online pro-sustainability behaviour intersects with different aspects of sustainable tourism. In particular it highlights the continuum that exists with respect to online consumer activism from relatively passive customer feedback to pursuit of digital communications that actively seek behavioral or policy change via boycotts and boycotts. As such, the research highlights the development of increasingly important forms of ethically-driven consumer behaviors and practices with substantial implications for sustainable tourism.

*Third*, we focused on the Gen Z cohort. There is a growing field of scholarship examining the sustainable behaviour of Gen Z as socially and environmentally conscious tourists (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Robichaud & Yu, 2021; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). However, there is little empirical research on this cohort of travellers' engagement in politically and ethically motivated consumption and their understanding of ethical consumption as a political practice.

*Lastly*, this study has been conducted in a developing country context highlighting that GenZ interest in ethical consumption is not just a Western practice. As such, this study also advances understanding of political consumerism among Gen Z and responds to the calls by scholars for increased research on ethical consumption in different contexts and different cultural settings (Aritzia et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2022; Sun, 2020), as political consumerism varies significantly among societies given the level of political freedom and the level of economic development largely influence ethical consumption. As Sun (2020) argued, consumers' judgment of political and ethical behaviour is dynamic and changes over time and across cultures. In so doing, this study substantially extends understandings of political consumerism in tourism.

The study has also some empirical implications. Most significantly, is the extent to which there is a continuum of political consumerism ranging from learning to issue activism. For destinations and tourism businesses the study highlights the importance of clear digital information provision and communication as this is the starting point at which individuals decide whether issues are meaningful to them or not, and therefore seek to influence decisions. It is also quite possible that a number of the domestic, localized, tourism issues that were the focus of campaigns in this study also become subjects of concern because there was a democratic deficit in the sense of there not being appropriate public involvement and discussion of issues in the first place that was digitally connected to affected and/or interested parties.

In this study, we explored political consumerism in terms of both boycotting and buycotting, with an emphasis on Gen Z. Future research might analyze this phenomenon in other age groups and generations. Despite the fact that, as demonstrated by the study's findings, there are strong positive links between digital media usage and political consumerism, although the intensity of mobilization may vary by country and political culture and across boycotting and buycotting campaigns. Furthermore, because of the sensitive nature of political research in the respondent's country (Seyfi & Hall, 2020b), the connection between tourism-related political consumerism and other political positions and actions, could not be investigated. Furthermore, there is a need to also understand how business, destinations and governments respond to digital political consumerism in terms of their own online tactics and means to engage and counter boycotts and buycotts. Another line of research for future investigation could be the research into the barriers to tourists' ethical and political tourism consumption across different generations. Finally, and most importantly, future research is recommended to investigate the drivers of political consumerism in tourism (for all three spectrums including spectator, transitional, and gladiatorial digital activities) and the role of digital media in shaping these drivers given that the influence of digital media is only likely to increase.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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