

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE MARKETING AND MERCHANDISING STRATEGIES FOR ITALIAN STUDENTS: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF INSUBRIA

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Abstract.

The importance of sustainability is an overall aspect of everyday life, even at an academic level. It is no longer just a research topic, but it can be found at a practical, theoretical, social, and promotional level in our society. Knowledge of the sustainability issues should be considered by all the actors involved, especially in the younger age groups.

This paper aims to understand the importance of numerous facets of sustainability and the circular economy in the academic field through a questionnaire distributed to students at the University of Insubria. After a brief theoretical framework related to the link between university, sustainability, and merchandising, the core part of the paper is focused on a survey. Administered in the summer of 2022, the survey aims to understand the major occurrences of these issues for respondents, checking their propensity for sustainability, knowledge of the circular economy, and the role of sustainable merchandising. To conclude, a statistical analysis of these elements is carried out to understand the overall level of importance and knowledge and to verify if there are gender differences.

Keywords. *Green Marketing, Merchandising, New Generations, Sustainability, University.*

Introduction

The growing attention to sustainability issues that initially involved institutions and businesses (Porter & Kramer, 2002) is also recently affecting the world of education,

where countless initiatives and projects have been launched in primary and secondary schools and universities.

In particular, Italian universities have recently captured the ability to influence information on sustainability issues. They have increased their awareness of the importance of educating the new generations about sustainability. For these reasons, they are committed to achieving the objectives defined by the UN, "Sustainable Development Goals", to regulate the agenda of the main actions until 2030 and become sustainable universities. Each university has different internal rules, but all aim at the common goal of promoting an approach to sustainability within the individual universities, which includes projects and initiatives; for example, many universities have joined the "Stop Single Use Plastic" campaign, established by the agreement of the Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities (CRUI). This agreement provides for the abandonment of single-use plastics and embracing eco-friendly alternatives; on the other hand, it starts from the establishment of specific bodies to implement the "sustainability plan" and plan educational activities; still, other universities provide for the inclusion of the topic of sustainability within the study programs. The importance of the role of universities on issues related to sustainability is identified for the first time in article 3 of the "Magna Charta Universitatum Europaeum", signed in Bologna in 1998, which states that the university must ensure future generations' education and training that makes it possible to contribute to respect for the balance of the natural environment and life. In this regard, in order to influence the new generations on the concepts and value of sustainability, in 2015, the Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities established the RUS - Network of Universities for Sustainable Development - the first experience of coordination and sharing between all Italian universities engaged in the issues of environmental sustainability and social responsibility. It was meant to direct their institutional activities toward sustainability objectives and actively participate in achieving the institutional objectives of the network (Sannella, 2020). There are many tools that universities are using to guide students' sustainability choices; in this work, we will focus on green marketing and sustainable merchandising, on which many universities are building original sustainable strategies.

Green Marketing and Sustainable Merchandising: A General Framework

The growing attention to sustainability, has led to the development of so-called green marketing, a marketing approach aimed at developing and producing eco-sustainable products and services, able to meet the needs of consumers without negative repercussions on the environment. The American Marketing Association argues that "Green marketing refers to the development and marketing of products that are presumed to be environmentally safe (i.e., designed to minimize negative effects on the physical environment or to improve its quality). This term may also be used to describe efforts to produce, promote, package, and reclaim products in a manner that is sensitive or responsive to ecological concerns".

Awareness of environmental issues is not the only objective of green marketing, as it includes several evolutionary phases, effectively described by Grant (2009): the first it was that of ecological green marketing, where all market activities aimed at highlighting environmental problems by providing possible remedies; in a second phase, environmental green marketing was developed, aimed at the creation of new innovative products that facilitate the disposal of waste. We are currently in the phase of sustainable green marketing, which manifests through an intent to promote products

and services that generate a reduced environmental impact. This new sales strategy implies the active involvement of the customer, who works with the company to create ideas, events, and virtual communities by spreading correct habits and lifestyles to follow (Fraai et al., 2011; Peattie, 2001). To be effective, an action linked to this new marketing approach must have precise characteristics, the so-called five "I's" of green marketing (Bhalerao & Deshmukh, 2015):

- Intuitive
- Integral
- Innovative
- Inviting
- Informed

The approach that is emerging from this innovative marketing model is focused precisely on moving away from excessive consumption, favoring aspects such as authenticity, product transparency, the active participation of customers also through word of mouth and virtual communities (Grant, 2009). Consumers, especially the new generations, are much more informed and involved, thanks to the development of information technologies, in which the customer has greater purchasing power by accessing information and comparing his alternatives directly. Protecting the environment has become a marketing lever since it is no longer enough for companies to know how to sell a product well. However, it is important to share and communicate values, explaining the deep meaning behind each of them (the controlled supply chain, the origin, substances used, packaging); for companies, it has become almost an "obligation" to propose sustainable alternatives and look for new strategies to sell. With this approach, we do not focus exclusively on promotion. Nevertheless, marketing covers a broader area that concerns the entire product life cycle, from product/service design to final consumer satisfaction. The marketing and ecological objectives must move homogeneously, hand in hand, as the customer must perceive the experience as something normal and not exceptional (one of the many objectives of green marketing). Therefore, "green" must be an integral part of the brand itself. From this point of view, merchandising activities assume increasing importance which, from a strategic point of view, become a strategic tool in order to strengthen two fundamental components of a brand and of a company as a whole: brand identity and brand awareness (Roggeveen et al., 2021).

It is possible to identify five ways in which sellers can convey solid brand identity through the merchandise they offer: focus on unique and original merchandise, take advantage of the local merchandise, reflect the characteristics of their area, include art in their merchandise, offer sustainable products and include high fashion products in their assortment; and five innovative merchandising methods to facilitate the communication of the brand identity to consumers: create themes, reflect the history of the brand, be "playful", exclusive reporting and virtual merchandising (Bilgin, 2018). It is imperative to find a correspondence between brand identity and consumer identity: this correspondence increases the probability of establishing a meaningful relationship with the customer, assuming that their involvement - establishes a strong customer-brand relationship - and leads to greater brand loyalty and an increase in their willingness to pay. This correspondence must be maintained, so the seller must continually create and integrate consumer experiences. To date, sellers have technology available, a tool capable of amplifying the brand identity and influencing the consumer's identity. Customers are easily linked to a brand if it shares values with which they

identify; Furthermore, the presence of new and exciting experiences is significant, which can expand the consumer's identity, possibly leading him to consider new perspectives. From this point of view, a company's attention to the values of sustainability is a powerful tool to bind consumers to a brand. This is especially true for the new generations, who are particularly sensitive to these issues, as many studies show (Barroso et al., 2020; Berkup, 2014).

Companies oriented toward a sustainable approach have understood the importance of including sustainability in merchandising activities, including eco-friendly materials in production processes, and inspired by the principles of the circular economy (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Gazzola et al., 2020a). For example, it is preferable to customize objects by choosing eco-compatible materials or those deriving from recycling; or, if you want to brand an item of clothing, we should make sure that the items are eco-friendly: sustainable clothing rejects polluting practices, such as the use of toxic or non-biodegradable substances. Sustainable merchandising is a growing trend, given the greater awareness acquired by both consumers and companies. Sustainable merchandising is characterized by merchandise purchased, produced, and shipped sustainably, including disposal, recycling, or reuse. Given the importance of these issues, many sellers market sustainable offers, adapting to the growing demand for this type of product, to attract eco-conscious consumers, which currently, as underlined, appears to be a preference above all of the new generations, with some gender differences that some studies are showing (Gazzola et al., 2020b; Bloodhart & Swim, 2020; Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2015). Offering sustainable products allows sellers to convey their values and principles, and to establish a strong bond between brand and consumer.

The role of sustainability in the Z-Generation

To promote awareness and sustainability-oriented behaviors, it is essential to develop personalized communication strategies with the final consumer (Dabija, 2019). This is important because on one hand the consumer is exposed to a huge amount of information and persuasive pressures, linked to the development of digital and multichannel communication and, on the other hand, he feels more and more free from conditioning in terms of methods, times and sources. To summarize, as sustained by Francis and Sarangi, (2022), the consumer wants to be the main decision maker of their choices, rather than the object of persuasion (Trudel, 2019).

By shifting the focus on the target of our work, it is possible to affirm that generation Z is most sensitive to sustainability. Sustainability is a problem that affects all generations, but nowadays it is a central discussion point especially for young people. According to research (Dabija et. al, 2019), people born between 1995 and 2010 belong to the generation most attentive to the issue of sustainability, in comparison to other generations. It is the generation Z who has realized an effective difference in poverty levels regarding the poorest world countries, also from the point of view of the distribution of resources and necessities. They are devoted to issues such as immigration and pay particular attention to these topics. Furthermore, the very young, from an early age understand very well the concept of food and water waste, reiterating it through a modification of what can be considered wrong or incorrect habits (Kamenidou et al., 2019). In fact, they are people adopt a lifestyle considered eco-friendly and pay high attention not only to the food sector but also considering a huge number of topics (Guzel, 2020). For example, generation z encourages separate

collection and pay attention to behaviors both inside and outside their home life (Goh & Jie, 2019). Moreover, in order to preserve resources, they have adapted to the use of electric vehicles in both large and small cities. The use of electric scooters and bikes is thus encouraged in line with the dictates of global legislation (Wawer et al., 2022).

Due to the theoretical framework, two research questions will be proposed:

DRQ1: Through descriptive statistical techniques the paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the sample, trying to provide an overview of the respondents regarding the issues of awareness of being a sustainable consumer, knowledge of SGDS and circular economy and importance of the university sustainable merchandising.

RQ1: Considering the literature on individuals' propensity for sustainability, we want to understand if there is a gender difference for the topics.

Methodology

Considering the aim of the paper, a survey, as previously mentioned was spread in the period June-august 2022 obtaining 173 answers to the entire population of the students, current enrolled at University of Insubria.

The questionnaire, administered via institutional e-mail, tried to understand, after the personal data section, the respondent's knowledge, and their propensity on environmental and sustainability issues. In fact, before the analysis concerning the role of University Merchandising, some specific questions were asked about the attitude towards sustainability (from a general perspective), the relevance of sustainability in the activities carried out by the University and the relevance of these activities for the respondent. Subsequently, the entire set of respondents have expressed their degree of knowledge and relevance on the concept of circular economy with its three principles. Subsequently the questionnaire focused on the role of merchandising, examining three aspects: the general interest, the propensity to buy and the sustainability of the products.

The data analysis process is based on two known methodologies:

Descriptive statistics, or descriptive analysis, is the part of statistics that deals with collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting the data of a population or sample using indicators and graphs (Zenga, 2014).

To verify the hypothesis three kind of hypothesis testing techniques are used (For a detailed description of these test, please see Good, 1981 and Weakliem, 2016):

- Two sample Z test of proportions is the test to determine whether the two populations differ in a significant way on specific characteristics.
- Two-sample Z-test for means is a technique that is used to determine if the difference between the two-population means is not statistically significant.
- The Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare differences between two independent groups when the dependent variable is either ordinal or continuous, but not normally distributed (it is important to punctuate that, for the hypothesis related to merchandising the data are not normally distributed).

Data Analysis

Before testing RQ1 it is necessary to provide an adequate description of the sample (DRQ1). The 173 respondents are 105 females and 64 males, while four individuals preferred not to specify their gender, with an average age of 24.38 years.

It is important to point out that, first of all the analysis considers the entire dataset, and subsequently, for answering to the research questions we will split the data for genders. Considering the declared level of education (as in the following graph Figure 1) we find that most of the respondents are represented by current three-year degree students at the university, the 76% of the respondents declared that they have a high school diploma, with a slight preponderance (39% of the total) with a Lyceum Diploma.

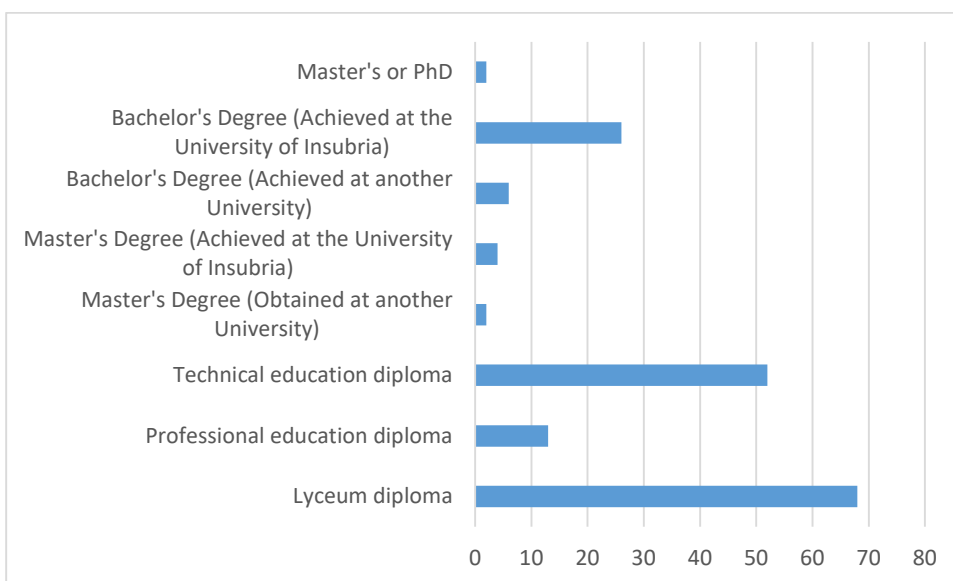


Figure 1 Educational qualification (Author's Own Source)

Considering the breakdown by the various departments of the University, it can be said that the percentages are representative of the distribution of students in the related degree courses.

As previously mentioned, before moving on to the actual relevance of some facets concerning the University Merchandising, some questions, related to Sustainability-Territory and Circular Economy were asked to the sample respondents. The first issue addressed is related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the first data that emerges is quite surprising as 55 respondents admitted that they do not know the Sustainable Development Goals. The remaining 68% (with varying degrees of knowledge) know the concept, its peculiarities, and what it represents.

Subsequently, we focused on a series of issues related to sustainability and asked for the student's personal evaluation through a scale (from 1 to 5) to understand the importance attributed to a series of actions and initiatives.

The same question was subsequently asked about how the same activities are implemented in the University and how the student in this area perceives them.

We focused on 12 aspects, and the average values are represented in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1 Sustainability Relevance and Importance (Author's Own Source)

Aspects	Personal relevance	Perceived relevance of the University's attention to the issue	Delta
Actions aimed at the sustainability of the environment and the territory	4.58	3.51	1.08
Fighting food waste	4.58	3.18	1.40
Initiatives for sustainable mobility	4.29	3.32	0.97
Sustainability initiatives developed with local actors	4.27	3.50	0.77
Gender equality	4.20	3.49	0.71
Specific initiatives promoted by the University (for example: Openday, Researchers' Night)	3.90	3.51	0.38
Sustainable university merchandising	3.64	3.71	-0.07
Educational offer (international)	4.29	3.62	0.66
Post-university educational offer (for example: Masters, Higher Education Courses)	4.20	3.39	0.82
Energy efficiency processes of university structures	4.54	3.22	1.32
Waste management	4.66	3.64	1.02
Scientific research	4.54	3.84	0.71

There is a relatively unambiguous answer, in fact in 11 cases out of 12¹, the importance attributed to the voice by the student is higher than the activities carried out and what the University can perceive externally. These results are a signal to be considered; in fact, the values related to these activities are pretty essential and, at the same time, are giving a message to the university that it is not be able to demonstrate, as it would be desired, the actual commitment to these rumors/actions. A possible conclusion in this regard is represented by a more significant future commitment from the University to understand the students' necessities in a more concrete and tangible way. The only item with a higher score between the student's relevance and the activity carried out by the University is the merchandising (low difference).

Subsequently, the questionnaire focused on the circular economy concept and its principles. The results, in terms of student knowledge, are relatively modest:

- 17 respondents defined themselves as citizens not attentive to sustainability and circular economy issues;
- 66 respondents affirmed that they were unaware of the principles of the Circular Economy.

Therefore, the remaining 90 were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the importance of the three principles of the Circular Economy. Therefore, the remaining 90 were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the importance of the three principles of the Circular Economy, obtaining similar results (more than 4.3, on average for the three principles). Finally, with reference to this section dedicated to sustainability and SDGS, we investigated, through two questions closed to multiple alternatives, the attention to sustainability and the reason that drive a consumer to choose a "sustainable product". The most selected alternatives are linked to purchasing eco-sustainable products and / or with some sustainability certificates. Secondly, respondents selected the purchase of products that comply with circular economy principles. On the other hand, considering the sustainability of a product, the majority of respondents, 62%, believe that a product, must be made with recycled raw materials, while another trendy alternative refers to the durability of the good, that it can replace disposable or shorter-lasting products. Considering Merchandising, only 134 respondents were able to answer to this section. The remaining 39 were unaware of sustainable merchandising at the University of Insubria and, for this reason, were excluded from the following analyses. To understand the propensity to buy and the importance placed by the respondent towards the new merchandising line, some statements were made and asked to evaluate the degree of agreement, likert scale from 1 to 5. In the following graph (Figure 2) there are the average values.

¹ All these aspects have been analyzed with a scale from 1 (minimum value) to 5 (maximum value)

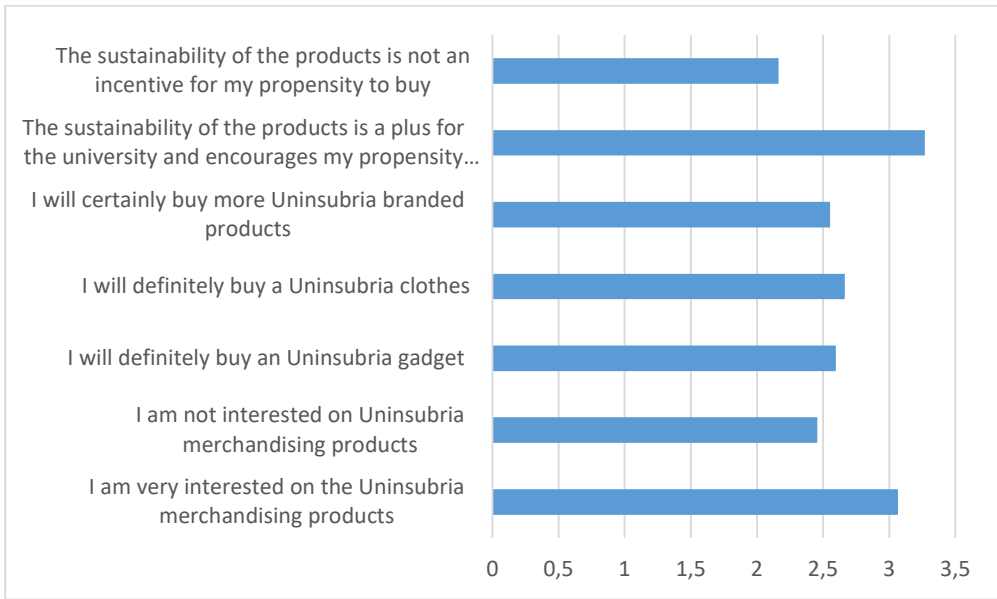


Figure 2 Importance of Merchandising (Author's Own Source)

It is possible to understand a medium interest in the merchandising products, there is a clear relevance on sustainability. Considering the first two statements, it is possible to note that the degree of agreement is opposite, consequently the respondent provided, on average, a clear and favorable opinion towards the sustainability of the products.

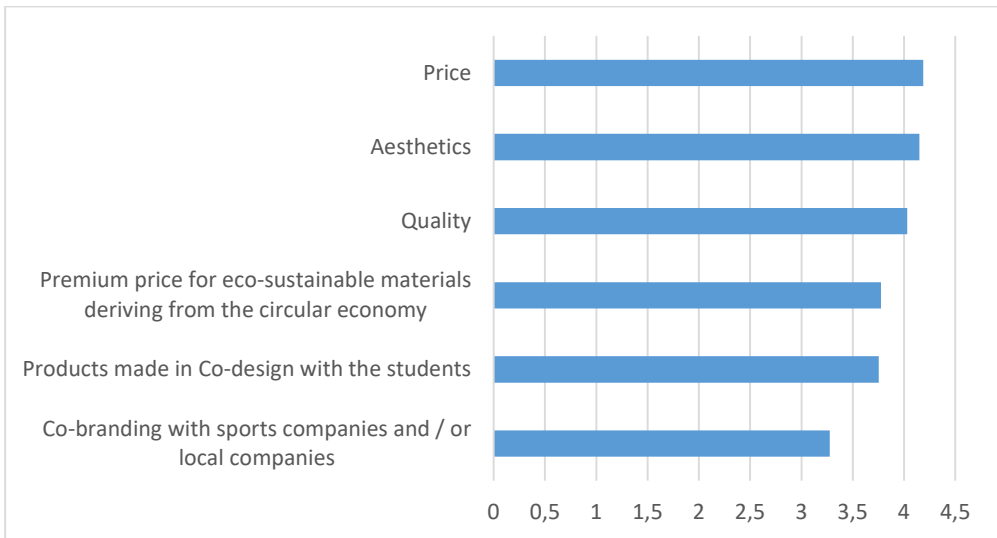


Figure 3 Features of merchandising (Author's Own Source)

Observing the previous graph (Figure 3), it is possible to note that the price is the characteristic deemed most important by the respondents. Furthermore, other interesting elements are represented by co-design and co-branding are evaluated with lower importance than the other items. After having outlined the sample from a descriptive point of view, the paper analyzed, through hypothesis testing techniques, if there is a different perception of these characteristics between women and men.

Results and discussion

As previously mentioned, the role of Gender and sustainability is widely discussed in the literature, for this reason, to solve our RQ1, different techniques of Hypothesis testing are used to analyze the data collected.

First of all, the level of knowledge of the SDGS defined by the UN 2030 Agenda is tested, in order to verify if there are any gender differences (as in table 2)

Table 2 Knowledge of SDGS (Author's Own Source)

Variable	Sample	Average level of Knowledge	Variance
Male	64	46.82	1497.86
Female	105	44.76	1329.71
Test Value	0.34		
P-Value	The P-Value is 0.73		

Due to the data (that are approximatively normal distributed) a Two-sample Z-test for means is used and there is no statistically significant difference between the two parts of the sample. For this reason, it is possible to affirm that, the knowledge of SDGS is similar for men and women.

Subsequently, using a Two-sample Z-test for means, we wanted to verify whether the importance of a series of aspects widely treated in universities has a different level of importance at the gender level (See table 3).

Table 3 Differences between importance and perceived value from university activities (Male sample=64; Female Sample=105) (Author's Own Source)

Variables	Mean Female	Variance Female	Mean Male	Variance Male	Z-Test	P-Value
Actions aimed at the sustainability of the environment and the territory	1.05	1.19	1.11	1.72	-0.32	0.74
Fighting food waste	1.45	1.5	1.33	1.53	0.61	0.54
Initiatives for sustainable mobility	0.95	1.57	0.98	2.14	-0.15	0.88

Variables	Mean Female	Variance Female	Mean Male	Variance Male	Z-Test	P-Value
Sustainability initiatives developed with local actors	0.8	1.06	0.75	1.31	0.29	0.78
Gender equality	0.95	1.4	0.3	2.43	2.9	0.004
Specific initiatives promoted by the University (for example: Openday, Researchers' Night)	0.43	1.29	0.27	0.98	0.98	0.33
Sustainable university merchandising	0.06	1.2	-0.27	1.7	1.66	0.09
Educational offer (international)	0.68	1.1	0.61	1.24	0.39	0.69
Post-university educational offer (for example: Masters, Higher Education Courses)	0.9	1.13	0.64	1.45	1.44	0.15
Energy efficiency processes of university structures	1.33	1.69	1.27	2.07	0.31	0.76
Waste management	0.99	1.34	1.08	1.32	-0.48	0.63
Scientific research	0.74	0.9	0.64	1.29	0.6	0.55

In this case it is denoted that, at the gender level, there are two aspects that are considered in a different and statistically significant way: the role of the sustainability of merchandising and the phenomenon of gender equality.

Table 4 Evaluation of behavior: attention to sustainability and circular economy. (Author's Own Source)

Variable	Sample	Percentage of sustainable behaviour in the day life
Male	64	0.85
Female	105	0.92
Test Value	1.4	
P-Value	The P-Value is 0.161.	

In the previous table (Table 4), using a Two sample Z-test of proportions (data are approximately normally distributed), the degree of attention declared by the respondents was assessed relative to the level of attention to the circular economy and the principles of sustainability in their day-life.

From a gender perspective, the percentage of sustainable behaviors is similar and not statistically significant.

In Table 5 the level of knowledge of the circular economy principles is analyzed using a Two sample Z-test of proportions (data are approximately normally distributed).

Table 5 Knowledge of the Circular Economy Principles (Author's Own Source)

Variable	Sample	Percentage of knowledge
Male	64	0.68
Female	105	0.42
Test Value	-9.18	
P-Value	P-Value is < .00001	

Considering the results of the test there is a higher statistical significance, which demonstrates a very different level of knowledge between men and women. Specifically, the average knowledge value of the men in the sample is 40% higher than the average value declared by the women.

Finally, as a final aspect of the analysis, we focus on university merchandising. Due to the Non-normality of the data, in this case, the Mann-U Whitney test is used.

Concerning this topic three characteristics are evaluated: General Interests, the propensity to purchase items, and the importance of sustainability in the products.

Table 6 Merchandising: aspects analysis (Author's Own Source)

Merchandising	
Interest	The Z-score is 1.78447. The p-value is .07508. The result is significant at $p < .10$.
Purchase Propensity	The Z-score is 0.77903. The p-value is .4354. The result is not significant at $p < .05$.
Sustainability of the products	The Z-score is 1.58728. The p-value is .11184. The result is not significant at $p < .05$.

Based on the results, it is possible to affirm that there is a general interest for female than male. While, for the other two characteristics, the level is similar.

For this reason, due to the tests' results, RQ1 is partially accepted, in fact, for some aspects, there are gender differences which cannot be generalized to all areas.

Conclusion

In this paper, the role of knowledge of a huge number of items linked with sustainability and circular economy is considered from the point of view of Uninsubria students. In addition, considering the actual renewal of the merchandising products, we have tried to analyse these elements' impact and relevance for this sample with a general overview and a gender perspective.

We want to understand their level of knowledge and the perceived importance of numerous activities and aspects of daily university life, as for the sample, how sustainability is perceived within the academic world. The role of sustainability, as emerged from the results, is strategic considering several points of view (teaching, research, third mission, socio-political activities) and is considered quite important by the sample of respondents. There is a general interest in sustainability with difficulties related to the topics of the circular economy, where knowledge is higher for the male respondents than the female side. Moreover, there is a huge interest in the female subsample but there are no statistically significant elements concerning propensity to purchase and sustainability. Considering the results and the response rate the role of merchandising seems quite relevant, but it is necessary to improve the communication to increase the importance of the products and, consequently, their diffusion and the sense of belonging to the university. The main limitation of the paper derives from the sample numerosity; In fact, to carry out statistical analyses the data is sufficient, but it cannot be considered a perfect proxy of this reality. Furthermore, considering a policy point of view, it will be necessary to understand more clearly the reasons that led a limited number of students (3% of the total) to provide their opinions.

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