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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ETHICAL DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT AND RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AMONG GEN Z: THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION, BRAND AUTHENTICITY, AND CANCEL CULTURE

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a critical space for sustainability communication, brand–consumer interaction, and ethical discourse. Generation Z, as the most digitally immersed consumer cohort, plays an increasingly influential role in evaluating corporate responsibility and shaping consumption practices. This study examines the effects of sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity on ethical digital engagement among Gen Z, and investigates how such engagement influences responsible consumption behavior aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 12. Adopting a quantitative research design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 250 Gen Z social media users in India. The study employed regression and mediation analysis to test the proposed relationships. The findings indicate that sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity each exert a significant positive influence on ethical digital engagement. Ethical digital engagement, in turn, demonstrates a strong positive effect on responsible consumption behavior. Mediation results further reveal that ethical digital engagement partially mediates the relationships between the three antecedent variables and responsible consumption behavior. The study contributes to the literature on digital marketing and ethical consumption by empirically integrating sustainability communication, authenticity, and cancel culture within a unified framework.

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By positioning ethical digital engagement as a key explanatory mechanism, the research offers insight into how digital interactions translate into responsible consumption among Gen Z.

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From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of transparent sustainability communication, authentic brand practices, and responsive digital strategies in fostering ethical engagement and advancing responsible consumption through social media.

Introduction:-

Social media has become a central arena for sustainability communication, fundamentally reshaping how organizations articulate ethical commitments and how consumers interpret corporate responsibility. Recent empirical evidence further highlights that psychological drivers such as fear of missing out (FOMO), instant gratification, and social validation significantly shape online consumer decision-making and engagement in digital environments (Gaur et al., 2026), allowing sustainability narratives to circulate rapidly while simultaneously exposing organizational practices to public scrutiny. Rather than serving merely as promotional tools, social media channels increasingly operate as participatory spaces in which environmental values, ethical expectations, and corporate accountability are actively constructed and contested (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019; White et al., 2019). This shift has positioned digital engagement as a critical mechanism through which sustainability discourse translates into consumer attitudes and behavior.

Within this evolving digital environment, Generation Z occupies a particularly influential role. As the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technologies, Gen Z demonstrates high levels of technological fluency, social awareness, and connectivity. Prior research consistently suggests that this cohort exhibits stronger concern for environmental and social issues than earlier generations and places heightened emphasis on transparency, authenticity, and ethical consistency in brand behavior (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Joung et al., 2014; Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Importantly, Gen Z does not engage with brand content passively. Instead, they actively seek information, compare sustainability claims across organizations, and participate in online discussions that evaluate the credibility of corporate practices (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Trudel, 2019).

At the same time, social media has intensified mechanisms of collective accountability, most visibly through the emergence of cancel culture. Digital platforms facilitate rapid mobilization around perceived corporate misconduct, enabling consumers to publicly challenge brands, withdraw support, and influence peer perceptions (Ng, 2020; Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018). For Gen Z, cancel culture functions not only as a form of protest but also as an expression of moral positioning, reflecting expectations that organizations should align commercial objectives with broader social and environmental responsibilities. These dynamics underscore the growing role of online communities in shaping ethical judgments and consumption-related decisions.

In parallel, brand authenticity has gained increasing prominence as a determinant of consumer trust and engagement. Authenticity refers to consumers' perceptions of whether brands are genuine, transparent, and consistent in their values and actions (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). As sustainability messaging becomes more widespread, consumers, particularly Gen Z, demonstrate rising skepticism toward symbolic initiatives and greenwashing practices. Instead, they favor organizations that display long-term commitment, openness, and coherence between digital communication and operational behavior (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Young et al., 2010). Authenticity thus plays a central role in shaping meaningful engagement in digital environments.

Although existing research has examined sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and ethical consumption as distinct areas of inquiry, relatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to understanding their combined influence on Gen Z's digital engagement and consumption behavior. Prior studies often focus on direct relationships, overlooking the processes through which digital stimuli are translated into behavioral outcomes (Brodie et al., 2013; White et al., 2019). In particular, the role of cancel culture in shaping ethical digital engagement remains underexplored, especially within emerging economy contexts. Moreover, while responsible consumption lies at the heart of Sustainable Development Goal 12, there is insufficient empirical clarity regarding how digital interactions foster sustainable consumption practices among younger generations.

Ethical digital engagement offers an important conceptual link in this process. It captures consumers' active participation in sustainability-related online activities, including information seeking, advocacy, peer discussion, and support for responsible brands (Brodie et al., 2013; Trudel, 2019). Such engagement reflects a shift from passive exposure to deliberate involvement and represents a key pathway through which digital communication influences purchasing decisions and everyday consumption choices.

Addressing these gaps, the present study examines how sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and sensitivity to cancel culture shape ethical digital engagement among Gen Z, and how this engagement subsequently influences responsible consumption behavior. Drawing on quantitative data collected from Gen Z social media users in India, the study develops and empirically tests an integrated framework linking digital communication practices with ethical engagement and consumption outcomes.

By doing so, this research contributes to literature in three important ways. First, it offers an integrated empirical perspective on sustainability communication, authenticity, and cancel culture within a single explanatory model. Second, it advances understanding of ethical digital engagement by positioning it as a mediating mechanism connecting digital stimuli to responsible consumption aligned with SDG 12 (United Nations, 2015). Third, by focusing on an emerging economy context, the study provides context-sensitive insights that extend predominantly Western-centric research and offer practical guidance for organizations seeking to design credible sustainability strategies and foster responsible consumption through social media.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development:-

Sustainability Communication and Ethical Digital Engagement:-

Sustainability communication refers to organizational efforts to convey environmental and social commitments through digital platforms, shaping how consumers perceive corporate responsibility and ethical orientation. With the growing centrality of social media, such communication has evolved from unidirectional information sharing to interactive engagement, enabling consumers to participate actively in sustainability discourse. Digital platforms thus function not merely as communication channels but as environments where meanings around sustainability are co-created through dialogue, peer influence, and collective evaluation (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019).

Prior research suggests that transparent and consistent sustainability communication enhances consumer trust and strengthens engagement with ethical content (White et al., 2019; Young et al., 2010). For Gen Z, sustainability-related messages serve as important cognitive and emotional cues that guide perceptions of brand values and legitimacy. Exposure to credible sustainability narratives has been shown to encourage information seeking, online interaction, and advocacy behaviors, reflecting deeper forms of engagement beyond superficial digital participation (Brodie et al., 2013; Djafarova and Fouts, 2022).

From a stimulus–organism–response perspective, sustainability communication operates as an external stimulus that activates internal evaluations and emotional responses, which subsequently shape engagement behavior. When sustainability messages are perceived as meaningful and trustworthy, Gen Z consumers are more likely to engage ethically by participating in online discussions, supporting responsible brands, and sharing sustainability-related content within their networks (Trudel, 2019).

Despite growing attention to sustainability messaging, empirical research remains limited in explicitly linking sustainability communication to ethical digital engagement among Gen Z, particularly in emerging economies. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes that sustainability communication positively influences ethical digital engagement. This aligns with prior research showing that digital environments activate psychological triggers such as urgency, peer validation, and emotional gratification, which significantly influence consumer engagement and behavioral responses (Gaur et al., 2026)

H1: Sustainability communication positively influences ethical digital engagement among Gen Z.

Brand Authenticity and Ethical Digital Engagement:-

Brand authenticity reflects consumers' perceptions of whether organizations act in alignment with their stated values and commitments. In digital environments, authenticity is continuously evaluated as consumers observe consistency across communication channels and organizational behavior over time (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Authentic brands are perceived as transparent, morally grounded, and reliable, fostering trust and emotional connection.

For Gen Z consumers, authenticity holds particular significance due to heightened sensitivity toward symbolic sustainability initiatives and greenwashing practices. Prior studies indicate that younger consumers are more skeptical of performative branding and more likely to disengage from organizations perceived as exaggerating or misrepresenting ethical commitments (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Joung et al., 2014). Conversely, authentic

sustainability efforts strengthen consumer identification with brands and encourage participatory behaviors such as online advocacy and peer influence.

Authenticity also plays a central role in shaping engagement intensity. When Gen Z perceives brands as genuine, they demonstrate greater willingness to interact with digital content, support ethical campaigns, and maintain long-term relationships with organizations. Empirical evidence increasingly suggests that authenticity enhances engagement quality rather than mere engagement frequency, reinforcing ethical involvement in digital spaces (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018).

However, existing literature largely treats authenticity as a direct predictor of purchase intention or brand trust, with limited attention to its role in fostering ethical digital engagement. Building on engagement theory, the present study argues that authenticity primarily operates by motivating consumers to participate ethically in digital environments.

H2: Brand authenticity positively influences ethical digital engagement among Gen Z.

Cancel Culture Sensitivity and Ethical Digital Engagement:-

Cancel culture represents a form of digitally mediated collective accountability, whereby consumers mobilize against brands perceived as engaging in unethical behavior. Social media amplifies these dynamics by enabling rapid dissemination of negative information, facilitating public critique, and encouraging coordinated disengagement (Ng, 2020; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). For Gen Z, cancel culture reflects broader commitments to social justice and corporate responsibility.

Sensitivity to cancel culture varies across individuals, influencing how strongly they respond to perceived ethical violations. Consumers with higher sensitivity are more likely to unfollow brands, participate in online criticism, and support boycotts or advocacy campaigns. These behaviors extend beyond punitive reactions and reflect active ethical engagement, reinforcing shared norms within digital communities (Trudel, 2019).

Emerging research suggests that exposure to corporate misconduct significantly shapes trust, engagement, and consumption decisions, particularly among younger consumers who rely heavily on peer-generated information (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Cancel culture thus functions as both a social control mechanism and an engagement catalyst, encouraging individuals to participate in ethical discourse and collective action.

Despite its growing relevance, cancel culture remains underexamined in quantitative consumer research, especially in relation to ethical digital engagement. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes that cancel culture sensitivity positively influences ethical digital engagement among Gen Z.

H3: Cancel culture sensitivity positively influences ethical digital engagement among Gen Z.

Ethical Digital Engagement and Responsible Consumption Behavior:-

Ethical digital engagement captures consumers' active participation in sustainability-oriented online activities, including information seeking, peer discussion, advocacy, and support for responsible brands (Brodie et al., 2013). The increasing integration of interactive digital technologies, including personalized and adaptive platforms, has further enhanced user engagement by enabling continuous interaction, real-time feedback, and participatory learning experiences in online environments (Sehgal and Singh, 2023). Such engagement reflects a transition from passive content consumption to deliberate ethical involvement.

Responsible consumption behavior encompasses purchasing decisions that minimize environmental harm and support ethical production, aligning closely with Sustainable Development Goal 12. Prior research demonstrates that digitally engaged consumers are more likely to translate sustainability awareness into tangible behavioral outcomes, including preference for sustainable products and reduced wasteful consumption (White et al., 2019; Young et al., 2010).

For Gen Z, ethical digital engagement serves as a bridge between online interaction and offline action. Continuous exposure to sustainability narratives, coupled with peer influence, strengthens ethical orientations and reinforces responsible consumption habits. However, existing studies often examine engagement and consumption independently, leaving the linkage between ethical digital engagement and responsible consumption insufficiently explored.

Accordingly, this study proposes:

H4: Ethical digital engagement positively influences responsible consumption behavior.

Mediating Role of Ethical Digital Engagement:-

Although sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity shape consumer perceptions, their influence on responsible consumption is unlikely to be purely direct. Ethical digital engagement represents the mechanism through which digital stimuli are transformed into behavioral outcomes.

Drawing on engagement theory and S–O–R logic, sustainability messaging and authentic branding function as external stimuli that activate ethical engagement, which subsequently drives responsible consumption. Similarly, heightened sensitivity to cancel culture promotes ethical reflection and digital participation, reinforcing engagement that ultimately influences purchasing behavior.

While prior studies acknowledge the importance of engagement processes, empirical research rarely models ethical digital engagement as a mediating construct, particularly within Gen Z populations and emerging economy contexts. Addressing this theoretical and empirical gap, the present study proposes ethical digital engagement as a central explanatory mechanism linking digital communication practices with responsible consumption behavior.

Accordingly:

H5: Ethical digital engagement mediates the relationship between sustainability communication and responsible consumption behavior.

H6: Ethical digital engagement mediates the relationship between brand authenticity and responsible consumption behavior.

H7: Ethical digital engagement mediates the relationship between cancel culture sensitivity and responsible consumption behavior.

Research Methodology:-

Research Design:-

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among sustainability communication, brand authenticity, cancel culture sensitivity, ethical digital engagement, and responsible consumption behavior. A survey-based approach was selected as it enables systematic testing of theoretically grounded relationships and mediation effects within naturally occurring social contexts (Hair et al., 2019). This design is particularly suitable for investigating perceptual constructs and behavioral intentions in digital environments.

The conceptual model was tested using regression-based mediation analysis, allowing for examination of both direct and indirect effects. Such an approach provides robust insight into underlying engagement mechanisms and is widely recommended for behavioral research involving mediating variables (Hayes, 2018).

Sample and Data Collection:-

The target population consisted of Generation Z individuals aged between 18 and 27 who actively use social media platforms. Respondents were recruited across multiple regions in India using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study objectives. This approach was deemed appropriate given the need to reach participants with regular exposure to digital brand communication and sustainability content (Etikan et al., 2016).

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via academic networks and social media channels. A total of 265 responses were initially received. After screening for completeness and response consistency, 250 valid questionnaires were retained for final analysis. This sample size exceeds minimum thresholds recommended for regression and mediation analysis, providing sufficient statistical power for hypothesis testing (Hair et al., 2019). Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to completing the questionnaire. To reduce social desirability bias, anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

Measurement of Constructs:-

All constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales adapted from established literature and refined to suit the present research context. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sustainability communication was measured using five items capturing perceived clarity, transparency, and consistency of brands' sustainability-related messaging on social media, adapted from prior work

on digital sustainability communication (White et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Brand authenticity was assessed using five items reflecting perceived genuineness, value alignment, and credibility, drawing on scales developed by Morhart et al. (2015) and Beverland and Farrelly (2010). Cancel culture sensitivity was measured through five items capturing respondents' responsiveness to unethical brand behavior, including tendencies to disengage, share critical content, and support collective accountability, informed by Ng (2020) and Kozinets and Handelman (2004). Ethical digital engagement was operationalized using five items representing active participation in sustainability-oriented online activities such as information seeking, discussion, and advocacy, adapted from Brodie et al. (2013). Responsible consumption behavior was measured using five items reflecting mindful purchasing, preference for sustainable products, and consideration of environmental impact, adapted from White et al. (2019) and Young et al. (2010). All items were reviewed for clarity and relevance through a pilot test involving 20 Gen Z respondents, resulting in minor wording adjustments prior to full-scale data collection.

Data Analysis Procedures:-

Data analysis was conducted in several stages using standard statistical software. First, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize respondent characteristics and study variables. Reliability of measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Construct validity was examined through convergent and discriminant validity tests using composite reliability and average variance extracted. Hypotheses H1–H4 were tested using multiple regression analysis. To examine mediation hypotheses (H5–H7), bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples were employed, as recommended by Hayes (2018), providing bias-corrected confidence intervals for indirect effects. Ethical digital engagement was modeled as the mediator between sustainability communication, brand authenticity, cancel culture sensitivity, and responsible consumption behavior. Age and gender were included as control variables to account for potential demographic influences. Common method bias was assessed using procedural remedies and Harman's single-factor test, with results indicating no serious common method variance concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Ethical Considerations:-

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. Respondents were informed of the study objectives and provided informed consent prior to participation. No personally identifiable information was collected. All data were analyzed in aggregate form and used solely for academic purposes.

Results:-

Respondent Profile:-

The final sample comprised 250 Gen Z respondents aged between 18 and 27 years. Of the participants, 54% identified as female and 46% as male. Approximately 62% were students enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs, while 38% were early-career professionals. All respondents reported regular use of social media platforms, with the majority indicating daily engagement. This profile confirms the suitability of the sample for examining digital engagement and sustainability-related perceptions among Gen Z.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis:-

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1. Mean scores across constructs ranged from 3.54 to 3.76, indicating generally favorable perceptions of sustainability communication, brand authenticity, ethical digital engagement, and responsible consumption behavior. Sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity were each positively correlated with ethical digital engagement. Ethical digital engagement also exhibited a strong positive correlation with responsible consumption behavior. None of the correlation coefficients exceeded 0.70, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern. These preliminary results provide initial support for the proposed relationships and justify proceeding with regression and mediation analyses.

Table 1-Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 250)

| Variables | Mean | SD | SC | BA | CC | EDE | RCB |
|--|------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----|
| Sustainability Communication (SC) | 3.71 | 0.63 | 1 | | | | |
| Brand Authenticity (BA) | 3.68 | 0.60 | 0.52** | 1 | | | |
| Cancel Culture Sensitivity (CC) | 3.54 | 0.66 | 0.46** | 0.49** | 1 | | |
| Ethical Digital Engagement (EDE) | 3.76 | 0.58 | 0.59** | 0.61** | 0.55** | 1 | |
| Responsible Consumption Behavior (RCB) | 3.73 | 0.61 | 0.47** | 0.50** | 0.43** | 0.65** | 1 |

Note: $p < 0.01$

Source:Self-complied

Reliability and Validity:-

The reliability and validity results are reported in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.85 to 0.89, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Composite reliability values were above 0.86 for all constructs, further confirming scale reliability. Convergent validity was established as average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 for each construct. Discriminant validity was supported as the square roots of AVE were greater than inter-construct correlations, indicating that each construct captured a distinct conceptual domain.

Table 2- Reliability and Validity Statistics

| Construct | Items | Cronbach's Alpha | CR | AVE |
|----------------------------------|-------|------------------|------|------|
| Sustainability Communication | 5 | 0.87 | 0.89 | 0.60 |
| Brand Authenticity | 5 | 0.88 | 0.90 | 0.62 |
| Cancel Culture Sensitivity | 5 | 0.85 | 0.87 | 0.58 |
| Ethical Digital Engagement | 5 | 0.89 | 0.91 | 0.64 |
| Responsible Consumption Behavior | 5 | 0.88 | 0.90 | 0.61 |

Source:Self-complied

Hypotheses Testing:-

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test H1–H4. As shown in Table 3, sustainability communication exerted a significant positive effect on ethical digital engagement ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Brand authenticity also demonstrated a significant positive influence on ethical digital engagement ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), providing support for H2. Similarly, cancel culture sensitivity was positively associated with ethical digital engagement ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Ethical digital engagement exhibited a strong positive effect on responsible consumption behavior ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H4. The model explained 48% of the variance in ethical digital engagement and 42% of the variance in responsible consumption behavior, indicating substantial explanatory power.

Table 3-Regression Results

| Hypothesis | Path | β | t | p |
|------------|-----------------------|---------|------|--------|
| H1 | SC \rightarrow EDE | 0.28 | 4.96 | <0.001 |
| H2 | BA \rightarrow EDE | 0.31 | 5.42 | <0.001 |
| H3 | CC \rightarrow EDE | 0.24 | 4.18 | <0.001 |
| H4 | EDE \rightarrow RCB | 0.52 | 8.37 | <0.001 |

Model Statistics:

EDE: $R^2 = 0.48$

RCB: $R^2 = 0.42$

Source:Self-complied

Mediation Analysis:-

The mediating role of ethical digital engagement was examined using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples. Results indicated significant indirect effects of sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity on responsible consumption behavior through ethical digital engagement. Bias-corrected confidence intervals for all indirect paths excluded zero, confirming mediation. Although direct effects remained statistically significant after inclusion of the mediator, their magnitudes were reduced, indicating partial mediation. These findings support H5, H6, and H7 and highlight ethical digital engagement as a central mechanism through which digital stimuli influence responsible consumption behavior.

Table 4-Mediation Analysis Results

| Path | Direct Effect | Indirect Effect | Total Effect | Mediation |
|------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------|
| SC \rightarrow RCB via EDE | 0.21 | 0.15 | 0.36 | Partial |
| BA \rightarrow RCB via EDE | 0.23 | 0.16 | 0.39 | Partial |
| CC \rightarrow RCB via EDE | 0.18 | 0.13 | 0.31 | Partial |

Source:Self-complied

Summary of Hypotheses Testing:-

Table 5 summarizes the outcomes of hypothesis testing. All proposed hypotheses (H1–H7) were supported by the empirical results.

Table 5-Summary of Hypotheses Testing

| Hypothesis | Result |
|------------|-----------|
| H1 | Supported |
| H2 | Supported |
| H3 | Supported |
| H4 | Supported |
| H5 | Supported |
| H6 | Supported |
| H7 | Supported |

Source:Self-complied

Discussion:-

The present study examined how sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity influence ethical digital engagement among Gen Z, and how such engagement subsequently shapes responsible consumption behavior. The findings provide empirical support for the proposed framework and offer nuanced insights into the mechanisms through which digital interactions contribute to sustainable consumption in contemporary social media environments. The significant effect of sustainability communication on ethical digital engagement suggests that Gen Z responds actively to transparent and meaningful sustainability messaging. Rather than remaining passive recipients of digital content, Gen Z consumers appear to engage more deeply when brands articulate environmental and social commitments in a credible manner. This finding reinforces prior research emphasizing that sustainability communication functions as an important stimulus for participatory consumer behavior and ethical involvement in digital spaces (White et al., 2019; Brodie et al., 2013). It also supports stimulus–organism–response logic, whereby sustainability messaging activates internal evaluations that subsequently translate into engagement behaviors.

Brand authenticity emerged as a particularly strong predictor of ethical digital engagement, highlighting the central role of perceived genuineness in shaping Gen Z's digital participation. This result aligns with earlier studies indicating that authenticity strengthens trust and emotional connection while mitigating skepticism toward corporate sustainability claims (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). For Gen Z, authenticity appears to operate as a credibility filter, distinguishing substantive commitments from symbolic initiatives. The finding underscores that ethical engagement is driven less by the volume of sustainability content and more by perceived alignment between communication and organizational practice. Cancel culture sensitivity was also found to significantly influence ethical digital engagement, reflecting the growing importance of collective accountability in digital consumer behavior. Respondents who demonstrated higher sensitivity to cancel culture exhibited stronger engagement with ethical content, suggesting that awareness of corporate misconduct stimulates participation in online advocacy and critical evaluation of brands. Consistent with emerging research on digital activism, cancel culture appears to function not merely as a punitive mechanism but as a form of ethical engagement that reinforces shared norms within online communities (Ng, 2020; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

Ethical digital engagement, in turn, showed a strong positive relationship with responsible consumption behavior. This finding confirms that digital participation extends beyond online interaction and influences real-world consumption practices. Gen Z individuals who actively engage with ethical content are more likely to adopt mindful purchasing habits, support sustainable brands, and consider environmental impact in their consumption decisions. This supports prior evidence that digitally engaged consumers are better positioned to translate sustainability awareness into behavioral change (White et al., 2019; Young et al., 2010). The mediation results further clarify these relationships by demonstrating that ethical digital engagement partially explains how sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity affect responsible consumption behavior. While digital stimuli exert some direct influence, their primary impact operates through consumers' active engagement with ethical narratives. This highlights ethical digital engagement as a critical mechanism linking digital communication to

sustainable consumption outcomes, extending existing literature that often focuses on direct effects alone. Taken together, the findings suggest that Gen Z's responsible consumption is shaped not simply by exposure to sustainability messages but by the extent to which individuals participate ethically in digital environments. This participatory dimension is particularly relevant for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 12, as it emphasizes the role of social media in fostering collective awareness, accountability, and behavioral change. The results indicate that credible sustainability communication, authentic branding, and responsiveness to ethical concerns are essential for cultivating meaningful engagement and promoting responsible consumption among younger generations.

Conclusion and Implications:-

Conclusion:-

This study investigated how sustainability communication, brand authenticity, and cancel culture sensitivity shape ethical digital engagement among Gen Z and how such engagement subsequently influences responsible consumption behavior aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 12. Drawing on quantitative evidence from Gen Z social media users in India, the findings demonstrate that all three antecedent variables significantly contribute to ethical digital engagement, which in turn plays a central role in driving responsible consumption practices.

The results highlight that Gen Z does not respond to sustainability narratives in a passive manner. Rather, responsible consumption emerges through active engagement with ethical content, reinforced by perceptions of authenticity and heightened awareness of corporate accountability. Ethical digital engagement partially mediates the relationships between sustainability communication, brand authenticity, cancel culture sensitivity, and responsible consumption behavior, underscoring its importance as a key mechanism through which digital interactions translate into real-world outcomes. By integrating these constructs within a unified empirical framework, the study advances understanding of how social media environments shape ethical consumer behavior and emphasizes the participatory nature of Gen Z's sustainability-related decision-making.

Theoretical Implications:-

This research contributes to the literature on digital marketing, sustainability, and consumer engagement in several important ways. First, it extends sustainability communication research by empirically linking digital messaging to responsible consumption through ethical digital engagement, moving beyond direct-effect models. Second, by incorporating brand authenticity and cancel culture sensitivity, the study offers a more comprehensive perspective on Gen Z's ethical behavior in digital contexts. Third, positioning ethical digital engagement as a mediating mechanism provides novel insight into how digital stimuli are transformed into behavioral outcomes. Finally, the study enriches sustainable consumption literature by offering empirical evidence from an emerging economy, addressing calls for greater contextual diversity in digital consumer research.

Managerial Implications:-

The findings offer actionable guidance for organizations seeking to engage Gen Z through social media. Brands should prioritize transparent and consistent sustainability communication supported by verifiable actions. Authenticity must be embedded across organizational practices rather than confined to marketing narratives. Organizations should also recognize the influence of cancel culture and proactively address ethical concerns by maintaining open dialogue and responsiveness on digital platforms. Encouraging ethical digital engagement through interactive campaigns, educational content, and community-oriented initiatives can strengthen consumer trust and foster responsible consumption. By facilitating meaningful participation rather than one-way communication, organizations can cultivate long-term relationships with Gen Z while advancing sustainability objectives.

Policy Implications:-

From a policy perspective, the study highlights the potential of social media as a tool for promoting sustainable consumption among younger generations. Policymakers may leverage digital platforms to enhance sustainability awareness and encourage responsible behavior aligned with SDG 12. Regulatory frameworks that promote transparency in sustainability claims and discourage misleading digital practices can further support ethical consumption. Collaboration between public institutions, educational organizations, and businesses may also strengthen digital literacy and sustainability education initiatives.

Limitations and Future Research:-

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference; future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to examine changes in ethical engagement and consumption over time. The reliance on self-reported measures may introduce response bias, suggesting value in incorporating objective behavioral data in future studies. Additionally, the focus on Gen Z in India may limit generalizability. Comparative studies across countries or age cohorts could provide further insight. Future research may also explore moderating factors such as cultural orientation, environmental values, or platform-specific dynamics, as well as investigate other digital phenomena influencing ethical consumption.

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