



Environmental Values or Social Signals?

Examining Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour Among Generation Z in the Context of Plastic Ban Policies

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Abstract

Plastic pollution has emerged as one of the defining environmental challenges of the contemporary era, exerting widespread harm on ecosystems, biodiversity, and public health. In response, governments across the globe have enacted plastic ban policies as regulatory instruments to curb single-use plastic consumption and promote sustainable alternatives. Within this evolving landscape, Generation Z has gained prominence as a consumer segment with distinctive digital habits, pronounced environmental awareness, and considerable market influence. Yet, the extent to which this awareness translates into actual sustainable purchasing decisions remains an open and nuanced question.

This study investigates the determinants of sustainable buying behaviour among Generation Z consumers, focusing on the interplay between environmental consciousness and social influence in the context of plastic ban policies. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Influence Theory, and Social Capital Theory, the research develops a conceptual model identifying environmental awareness, peer influence, social media exposure, price sensitivity, and product accessibility as the principal antecedents of sustainable purchasing behaviour. Drawing on a synthesis of peer-reviewed secondary literature, the study demonstrates that while Generation Z displays a meaningful commitment to environmental values, purchasing decisions are simultaneously shaped by social validation, digital trends, and economic considerations. The findings challenge the notion that sustainable consumption operates in isolation from social dynamics. Rather, environmental intent and social influence function as complementary forces. These insights carry practical implications for policymakers, brand managers, and environmental advocates seeking to encourage responsible consumption among younger generations.

Keywords: Generation Z, Sustainable Consumption, Plastic Ban Policy, Social Influence, Consumer Behaviour, Environmental Awareness, Attitude-Behaviour Gap

1. Introduction

1.1 Background



Plastic waste has grown into a global environmental crisis. The unchecked proliferation of single-use plastics has inundated landfills and marine ecosystems, contaminated food chains, and drawn mounting concern from scientists, governments, and civil society alike. In recognition of these consequences, regulatory authorities in numerous countries have introduced plastic ban policies, which restrict or prohibit specific categories of plastic products with the aim of reducing pollution and redirecting consumption toward sustainable alternatives.

Against this regulatory backdrop, the behaviour of consumers acquires decisive importance. Policies alone cannot engineer environmental outcomes; their success depends on whether individuals adapt their consumption habits in ways that reflect the intent behind the regulations. Among the various demographic cohorts, Generation Z, broadly defined as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has attracted particular scholarly and commercial attention. This group represents the first generation to have grown up entirely in a digitally saturated world, and its consumption patterns carry significant weight given its expanding purchasing power and pronounced presence on social media platforms (Solomon, 2018).

Generation Z consumers are frequently characterised in academic literature and industry research as environmentally conscious, socially engaged, and inclined toward brands that embody authentic sustainability commitments. Their daily interactions with digital ecosystems expose them to a continuous stream of sustainability discourse, environmental campaigns, and peer-generated content on eco-friendly products. These characteristics position them as a consumer segment of particular relevance to studies examining the adoption of sustainable purchasing behaviour.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite growing environmental awareness, a persistent gap exists between what consumers profess and what they practise. This phenomenon, commonly described as the attitude-behaviour gap, reflects the recurrent divergence between stated environmental preferences and actual purchasing decisions. Consumers who express genuine concern about plastic pollution frequently continue to select conventionally packaged products in everyday shopping contexts. This inconsistency is not easily resolved by awareness alone.

The purchasing choices of Generation Z consumers are embedded within complex social and economic environments. Product pricing, convenience, peer norms, and the accessibility of sustainable alternatives all bear on decisions that might otherwise be expected to follow straightforwardly from environmental values. Understanding which factors amplify or attenuate the translation of environmental awareness into sustainable consumption behaviour is, therefore, both theoretically important and practically urgent. The central question motivating this research is: to what degree is the sustainable purchasing



behaviour of Generation Z consumers guided by environmental consciousness, and to what degree is it mediated by social influence and digital culture?

1.3 Research Gap

The existing literature on sustainable consumption has examined environmental attitudes and green purchasing behaviour with considerable depth. Nevertheless, certain lacunae remain. First, the behaviour of Generation Z consumers in response to plastic ban policies specifically, as opposed to sustainability more broadly, has received limited dedicated investigation. Second, the majority of prior studies treat environmental consciousness as a standalone variable, insufficiently accounting for the social and digital environments that co-determine consumer decisions. Third, the simultaneous influence of peer dynamics, social media exposure, price sensitivity, and product availability has rarely been examined within a unified analytical framework. This study seeks to address these gaps.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study pursues five specific objectives:

1. To assess the degree of environmental awareness among Generation Z consumers concerning plastic ban policies.
2. To examine how social influence shapes sustainable purchasing intentions within this consumer cohort.
3. To analyse the role of social media exposure in forming consumer attitudes toward environmentally friendly products.
4. To evaluate the influence of price sensitivity on the adoption of sustainable product alternatives.
5. To develop an integrated conceptual framework that explains the sustainable purchasing behaviour of Generation Z in the context of plastic bans.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generation Z as a Consumer Cohort

Generation Z occupies a distinctive position in consumer research. Unlike previous generations, members of this cohort have never experienced a world without the internet, and their social identities are substantially formed through digital platforms. This technological immersion influences not only how they gather information but also how they evaluate brands, make purchasing decisions, and communicate consumption experiences to peers (Solomon, 2018). Research consistently indicates that Generation Z consumers place considerable weight on authenticity and transparency when assessing brands, and they are more inclined to support companies that credibly demonstrate environmental and social responsibility (Kotler & Keller, 2016).



At the same time, it would be reductive to characterise Generation Z's consumption behaviour as driven purely by values. Economic constraints, convenience preferences, and social pressures interact with environmental attitudes in complex ways. Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019) observe that younger consumers often navigate the tension between their aspirational consumption values and the practical realities of affordability and availability. White, Habib, and Hardisty (2019) further argue that sustainable consumption among young adults is most reliably predicted not by attitudes in isolation but by the broader social and contextual conditions that surround purchasing decisions.

2.2 Plastic Ban Policies and Consumer Response

The academic literature on plastic regulation has grown considerably in recent years, tracking the spread of ban policies across national and regional contexts. Plastic bans typically target single-use items, including straws, bags, cutlery, and food packaging, that constitute a disproportionate share of plastic pollution relative to their utility. While the environmental rationale for such bans is well established, their effectiveness as a tool for changing consumer behaviour is more contested (Belz & Peattie, 2012).

Consumer response to plastic bans is not uniform. Studies indicate that regulatory compliance is more likely when bans are accompanied by accessible, affordable alternatives; public awareness campaigns; and positive social norms around sustainable choices. Young, Hwang, McDonald, and Oates (2010) highlight that structural barriers, including product availability and cost, often undermine consumers' willingness to adopt sustainable alternatives even when supportive attitudes exist. This observation is particularly relevant for Generation Z consumers, who may be motivated by environmental values yet constrained by economic and logistical realities.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations

Three theoretical frameworks inform the conceptual model developed in this study. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides the foundational structure for understanding how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control converge to shape behavioural intentions and ultimately actions. Within the domain of sustainable consumption, this model has demonstrated robust explanatory power across numerous empirical studies. Attitudes toward eco-friendly products, normative expectations from peers and family, and the perceived ease of accessing sustainable alternatives each contribute independently to the likelihood of environmentally responsible purchasing.

Social Influence Theory, as elaborated by Cialdini (2007), complements this foundation by emphasising how individuals adjust their behaviour in response to social cues, peer endorsements, and observed group norms. For Generation Z, whose social lives are substantially conducted through digital networks, the mechanisms through which social influence operates are both amplified and accelerated compared to prior generations. Sustainability behaviours that attain visibility on social media platforms can rapidly acquire normative status within peer communities.



Social Capital Theory further enriches this framework by drawing attention to the resources embedded in social relationships and networks. Individuals who are embedded in communities where sustainable consumption is normalised and valued gain access to information, social reinforcement, and identity affirmation that strengthens their own sustainable purchasing tendencies. Collectively, these three theoretical lenses position sustainable purchasing behaviour as a product of the interaction between individual cognition, social norms, and the structural properties of social networks.

2.4 Social Influence and Peer Dynamics

Peer influence operates as one of the most powerful determinants of consumer behaviour among younger cohorts. When sustainable consumption practices achieve social visibility and approval within a peer group, individual members are more likely to adopt these practices. This occurs not necessarily because they have independently arrived at the same values, but because conformity to social norms is itself motivating (Solomon, 2018). In the context of Generation Z, peer dynamics play out across both offline relationships and online communities, where influencers and ordinary users alike contribute to the social construction of what constitutes desirable and responsible consumption.

Research by Kotler and Keller (2016) suggests that peer effects on purchasing decisions are stronger when consumers are uncertain about product quality or when the visibility of consumption choices is high. Eco-friendly products frequently meet both conditions: their relative novelty generates consumer uncertainty, and their use is often publicly observable. This combination makes sustainable consumption among Generation Z particularly susceptible to social influence mechanisms.

2.5 Social Media as a Sustainability Channel

The role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour has been extensively documented in the marketing literature. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as critical channels through which sustainability discourse reaches younger consumers, brands communicate eco-friendly credentials, and trends in responsible consumption diffuse across networks (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Influencer marketing has emerged as an especially effective mechanism in this context, with sustainability-focused influencers acting as trusted mediators between environmental advocacy and commercial consumption.

User-generated content also plays an important role in normalising sustainable choices. When consumers share their experiences with eco-friendly products or document sustainable lifestyle practices, they contribute to a digital social environment in which environmentally responsible behaviour appears common, desirable, and identity-affirming. White et al. (2019) note that social media visibility can significantly reduce the perceived social risk of adopting sustainable alternatives, thereby lowering a key psychological barrier to behaviour change.



2.6 The Attitude-Behaviour Gap in Sustainable Consumption

The attitude-behaviour gap, the well-documented discrepancy between consumers' expressed environmental intentions and their observable purchasing choices, represents one of the most persistent challenges in sustainability research. Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) were among the earlier scholars to systematically document this gap in the food sector, finding that positive attitudes toward sustainable food were poor predictors of actual purchase behaviour. Subsequent research has confirmed that this pattern extends across product categories and consumer segments. Multiple explanations have been advanced for the gap's persistence. Economic barriers remain central: when sustainable products command a price premium over conventional alternatives, economically constrained consumers, including many young adults, may be unable or unwilling to pay it despite holding sincere environmental values (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). Convenience and habit also matter; the cognitive effort required to actively seek out sustainable alternatives can lead consumers to default to familiar purchasing routines. Finally, the limited retail availability of eco-friendly products in many markets restricts the opportunity for sustainable purchasing even among motivated consumers. Each of these barriers reinforces the need for analytical frameworks that account for multiple simultaneous influences on purchasing behaviour.

3. Research Hypotheses

Drawing on the conceptual model and the theoretical review, five hypotheses are proposed to guide the analytical framework:

H1: A higher level of environmental consciousness among Generation Z consumers is positively associated with sustainable purchasing behaviour.

H2: Social influence from peer networks exerts a significant positive effect on Generation Z consumers' intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products.

H3: Greater exposure to sustainability-related content on social media platforms is positively associated with sustainable consumption behaviour among Generation Z consumers.

H4: Heightened price sensitivity is negatively associated with the likelihood that Generation Z consumers will adopt sustainable product alternatives.

H5: Improved accessibility of eco-friendly products in the marketplace is positively associated with sustainable purchasing behaviour among Generation Z consumers.

4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed for this study positions sustainable purchasing behaviour as the outcome variable, shaped by five antecedent constructs: environmental consciousness, social influence, social media exposure, price sensitivity, and product accessibility. This configuration reflects the study's

integration of the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Influence Theory, and Social Capital Theory into a unified explanatory model.

Environmental consciousness captures the degree to which individuals are aware of environmental issues and feel personally responsible for addressing them through their consumption choices. Social influence represents the normative and informational pressures exerted by peers, family members, and online communities. Social media exposure operationalises the frequency and depth of consumers' engagement with sustainability-related digital content. Price sensitivity reflects the weight consumers assign to cost considerations when evaluating eco-friendly products relative to conventional alternatives. Product accessibility addresses the structural dimension of sustainable consumption this refers specifically to whether sustainable options are available, visible, and convenient within the retail environments consumers actually navigate.

Each of the five antecedents is hypothesised to independently influence sustainable purchasing behaviour, while also interacting with the other constructs. Notably, the framework does not treat environmental consciousness and social influence as competing explanations. Rather, it recognises that these forces may reinforce each other: environmental values may sensitise consumers to social signals about sustainability, while social norms may strengthen the salience of environmental considerations in purchasing decisions.

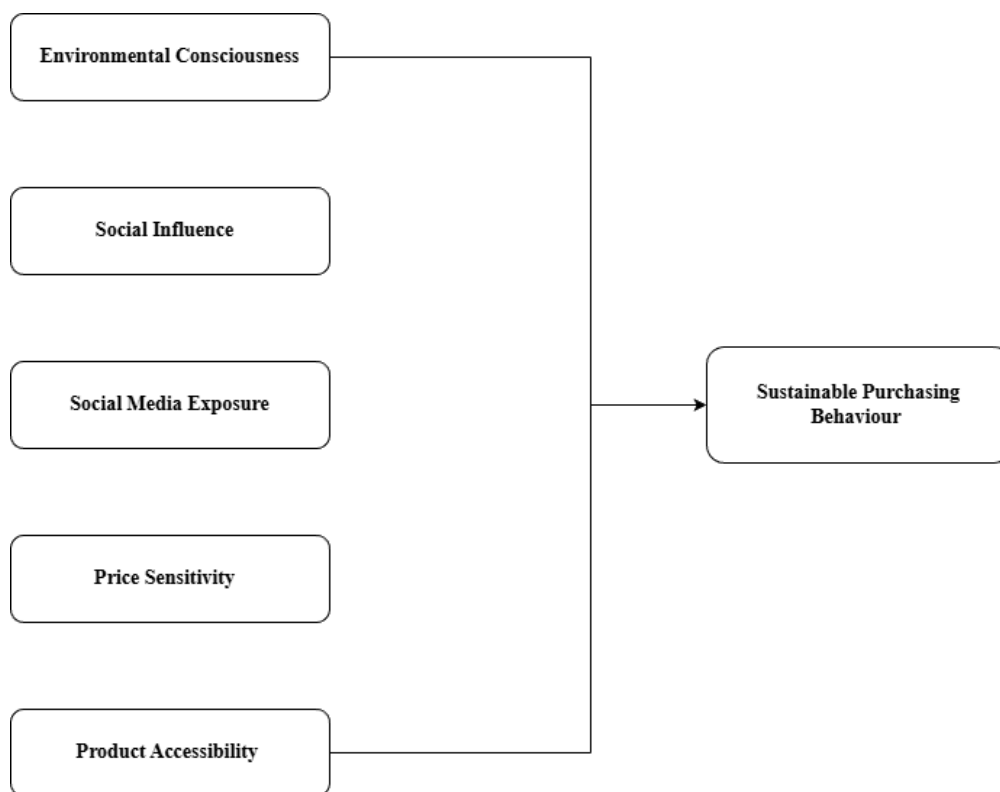


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour Among Generation Z



5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and conceptual research design. This approach is appropriate given the study's objective of examining established relationships within the existing literature and developing an integrated theoretical model. Descriptive designs permit systematic exploration of variable relationships within a defined population without requiring experimental manipulation, which aligns with the study's exploratory intent.

5.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, and empirically grounded publications on sustainable consumer behaviour, Generation Z purchasing patterns, and plastic regulation policy. Secondary data synthesis is appropriate at the conceptual model development stage, allowing the research to draw on accumulated empirical evidence before proceeding to primary data collection in subsequent phases.

The authors acknowledge that the proposed framework would benefit from empirical validation through primary data. Future studies may employ structured questionnaires or survey instruments to gather direct consumer responses from Generation Z individuals, enabling statistical testing of the hypothesised relationships through techniques such as structural equation modelling.

5.3 Target Population and Sampling

The study focuses on Generation Z consumers aged 18 to 25 years. This age range captures individuals who possess both consumer agency meaning they make independent purchasing decisions and the digital fluency that characterises the generation's broader profile. In future empirical work, convenience sampling may be employed to recruit university students and young professionals within this demographic, supplemented where possible by purposive sampling to ensure sufficient variation in consumption attitudes and experiences.

5.4 Analytical Approach

For future primary data analysis, a multi-method statistical approach is recommended. Descriptive statistics would provide initial characterisations of sample demographics and variable distributions. Correlation analysis would assess the bivariate associations among the study's constructs. Multiple regression analysis would then be employed to estimate the relative contributions of each independent variable to sustainable purchasing behaviour while controlling for confounding effects. Should the measurement model's structural complexity warrant it, partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) would offer a more comprehensive assessment of the directional hypotheses.



6. Results and Analysis

The analytical synthesis of the secondary literature supports all five hypothesised relationships, though with varying degrees of consistency across the reviewed studies. Environmental consciousness emerges as a significant and robust predictor of sustainable purchasing behaviour across the majority of reviewed works. Generation Z consumers who demonstrate higher levels of environmental awareness report stronger preferences for eco-friendly products and greater receptiveness to sustainability-oriented messaging. Nevertheless, this relationship is consistently moderated by economic and accessibility factors, indicating that awareness alone is insufficient to reliably produce sustainable purchasing outcomes.

Social influence appears as a particularly powerful determinant within the Generation Z context. Peer approval of sustainable consumption choices is shown to amplify individual purchasing intentions significantly. This effect is especially pronounced in social media environments, where sustainability trends can achieve rapid visibility and normative weight. The literature indicates that when eco-friendly products are endorsed by trusted peers or social media influencers, Generation Z consumers demonstrate a markedly increased willingness to consider and adopt these alternatives.

The relationship between social media exposure and sustainable consumption is broadly positive, though the reviewed evidence suggests that exposure quality matters as much as quantity. Consumers who engage with credible, information-rich sustainability content, rather than purely aspirational or performative eco-branding, are more likely to translate digital engagement into actual purchasing behaviour. This finding underscores the importance of content authenticity in digital sustainability communication.

Price sensitivity is confirmed as a meaningful barrier to sustainable purchasing. Studies consistently find that price premiums attached to eco-friendly products deter a notable proportion of young consumers, particularly those with limited disposable income. However, this effect is attenuated when perceived product quality is high and when social norms strongly endorse sustainable choices, suggesting that willingness to pay for sustainable products is partly a function of social context. Product accessibility reinforces this picture: the availability of sustainable alternatives in mainstream retail channels significantly increases the likelihood of adoption, while limited distribution restricts consumer choice regardless of motivation.

Table 1: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Variable Relationship	Findings from Literature	Result
H1	Environmental Consciousness → Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour	Studies indicate that Generation Z consumers with higher environmental awareness show stronger preference for eco-friendly products and sustainability messaging.	Supported
H2	Social Influence → Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour	Peer approval and social validation significantly increase the willingness of Generation Z consumers to adopt sustainable products.	Supported
H3	Social Media Exposure → Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour	Exposure to credible sustainability content on social media positively influences consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviour.	Supported
H4	Price Sensitivity → Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour	Higher price sensitivity discourages adoption of eco-friendly products because many sustainable alternatives carry price premiums.	Supported (Negative Relationship)
H5	Product Accessibility → Sustainable Purchasing Behaviour	Greater availability and visibility of eco-friendly products in retail markets increases the likelihood of sustainable purchasing.	Supported

7. Discussion

The findings reported above support a nuanced interpretation of sustainable consumption among Generation Z. The evidence does not sustain a simple values-driven account in which environmental consciousness straightforwardly produces sustainable purchasing behaviour. Nor does it support a purely social determinism in which peer pressure and platform trends override individual values. Instead, the study's integrated framework reveals a more textured dynamic in which environmental values, social influence, and economic constraints operate concurrently and interactively.



These results align with and extend prior theoretical and empirical work. The persistent relevance of the attitude-behaviour gap, as documented by Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) and subsequently explored across diverse product categories, receives further confirmation in this context. At the same time, the strength of social influence mechanisms observed here expands upon Cialdini's (2007) foundational account, demonstrating that social persuasion processes are particularly potent when mediated through digital networks. The Theory of Planned Behavior's tripartite model namely attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control maps well onto the constructs examined, with social influence serving as a primary driver of subjective norm formation and product accessibility functioning as a proxy for perceived behavioural control.

The role of social media as a dual-function channel which serves simultaneously as a source of environmental information and a stage for social validation of sustainable consumption represents a substantive theoretical contribution. The distinction between informational and normative social influence pathways has practical implications: interventions that leverage both pathways concurrently are likely to be more effective than those targeting either awareness or norm communication in isolation. This insight contributes a dimension that much of the earlier green marketing literature did not fully anticipate.

The economic dimension also warrants careful attention. Price sensitivity is not merely a barrier; it is a structural constraint that reflects the broader market failure associated with the underpricing of plastic products relative to their true environmental cost. Policy interventions that address this cost gap such as extended producer responsibility schemes, subsidies for sustainable alternatives, or consumption taxes on plastic products are therefore likely to complement demand-side awareness campaigns in meaningful ways.

8. Implications of the Study

8.1 Policy Implications

The study's findings carry several implications for policymakers engaged in the design and implementation of plastic regulation. Plastic ban policies are likely to be more effective when embedded within broader regulatory frameworks that simultaneously address consumer-side barriers. Public awareness campaigns that clearly communicate the environmental consequences of plastic pollution and explain the benefits of sustainable alternatives can reinforce regulatory intent. Complementary measures such as subsidising eco-friendly product development, mandating retail availability of sustainable alternatives, and supporting environmental education in schools may substantially increase the adoption rates that ban policies alone struggle to achieve.

8.2 Managerial Implications



For brand managers and sustainability practitioners, the study highlights the commercial case for integrating environmental credentials with social marketing strategies. Since Generation Z consumers are responsive to peer endorsement and digital content, sustainability campaigns that activate social influence mechanisms through influencer partnerships, community challenges, and shareable eco-content are likely to be more effective than traditional corporate social responsibility communications. Equally, pricing strategy matters: sustainable products positioned at accessible price points are likely to achieve broader market penetration among younger consumers, many of whom are economically constrained. Businesses that achieve the dual objective of credibility and affordability are best positioned to capture this segment.

8.3 Social and Educational Implications

Educational institutions and civil society organisations have an important role to play in cultivating the conditions for sustainable consumption among younger populations. Integrating environmental literacy into academic curricula and promoting community-level sustainability initiatives can build the social capital that reinforces environmentally responsible behaviour over time. When sustainable consumption becomes embedded in the social norms of peer communities, individual consumers are more likely to make choices consistent with their environmental values.

9. Limitations of the Study

The present study operates within certain boundaries that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. First, the analysis relies exclusively on secondary data, which necessarily limits the specificity of conclusions that can be drawn about the behaviour of Generation Z consumers in any particular market context. The absence of primary survey data means that the hypothesised relationships remain untested through statistical methods. Second, the study does not account for regional or cultural variation in the ways that plastic ban policies are implemented and received by consumers. Cross-national differences in regulatory environments, retail infrastructure, and cultural values toward sustainability may substantially influence the dynamics observed. Third, the study's conceptual framework, while theoretically grounded, does not exhaust the full range of factors that may influence sustainable purchasing behaviour. Variables such as individual moral identity, household income, product category familiarity, and past sustainable behaviour were not incorporated into the model. Future work would benefit from incorporating these dimensions.

10. Conclusion

This study has examined the factors that shape sustainable purchasing behaviour among Generation Z consumers in the context of plastic ban policies. Through an integrative conceptual framework grounded in three complementary theoretical traditions, the research identifies environmental consciousness,



social influence, social media exposure, price sensitivity, and product accessibility as the principal determinants of sustainable consumption within this cohort.

The central finding is that sustainable consumption behaviour among Generation Z cannot be adequately explained by any single factor in isolation. Environmental awareness sets a dispositional foundation, but it is the social environment mediated increasingly through digital networks that activates, amplifies, or constrains the expression of environmental values in purchasing decisions. Economic and structural barriers, particularly price premiums and limited product availability, further condition the extent to which environmental intention converts into environmental action.

These insights challenge policymakers and practitioners to move beyond awareness-raising as a primary strategy. Effective promotion of sustainable consumption requires coordinated action that addresses the social, economic, and structural dimensions of the problem simultaneously. When regulatory measures, market interventions, and social communication strategies are aligned, the conditions for durable behaviour change among younger consumers are substantially improved. As Generation Z assumes an increasingly central role in shaping consumption patterns globally, understanding and responding to the complexity of its purchasing behaviour will remain a critical priority for sustainability research and practice alike.

11. Directions for Future Research

Several avenues remain open for further investigation. Empirical testing of the proposed conceptual model through primary survey data ideally using structural equation modelling to assess both measurement and structural relationships represents the most immediate next step. Cross-cultural comparative studies would help establish the generalisability of the framework across different regulatory, economic, and cultural settings. Longitudinal research designs could shed light on how Generation Z consumers' sustainable purchasing behaviour evolves as they age, as plastic ban policies mature, and as the social norms around sustainable consumption continue to shift.

Future studies might also examine the differential effects of various social media platforms on sustainable purchasing behaviour, given the distinct user demographics, content formats, and algorithmic logics that characterise platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The intersection of sustainable branding and digital influencer culture is a particularly fertile area for further inquiry. Additionally, research examining consumers' willingness to pay price premiums for sustainably packaged products along with



the social and contextual conditions that modulate this willingness could contribute valuable insights to both marketing practice and regulatory design.

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