

Between Awareness and Action: Exploring Gen Z's Purchase Intentions towards Sustainable Clothing

Ms. Mandeep Kaur^{1*}, Dr. Amarjeet Kaur Malhotra², Dr. Shweta Mittal³

^{1*}Research Scholar, Gurugram University, Email ID: mandeepkour01@gmail.com

²Dean, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Gurugram University, Email ID:
dean.fcm.gu@gmail.com

³Adjunct Faculty, Indian Institute of Public Administration, Email ID: f12shwetam@iima.ac.in

Abstract

The fashion industry is increasingly criticized for its environmental and social impacts, making sustainable clothing a critical pathway toward responsible consumption. Generation Z, often characterized as environmentally aware and socially conscious, represents a vital consumer group for sustainable fashion. Yet, despite their strong pro-sustainability attitudes, a persistent gap remains between their intentions and actual purchase behavior. This study employs a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how Gen Z consumers perceive, consider, and make decisions about sustainable clothing choices. Using 25 semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, four key themes emerged: (1) peer validation and social media influence, (2) affordability and accessibility barriers, (3) moral identity and environmental values, and (4) knowledge–action dissonance. Together, these findings illustrate the complex interplay between values, social expectations, and structural constraints shaping Gen Z's purchase intentions. The study contributes by providing context-specific insights into Gen Z's lived experiences. Practical implications for fashion brands and policymakers are also discussed.

1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has been repeatedly criticized for its extensive environmental and social footprint, including excessive water consumption, chemical pollution, and exploitative labor practices (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Fletcher & Tham, 2019). In response, sustainable clothing has been promoted as a more responsible alternative, focusing on ethical production, eco-friendly materials, and circular business models (Joy et al., 2012; Bocken et al., 2016). Despite heightened public awareness, a striking paradox persists: many consumers claim to support sustainable fashion, yet relatively few translate this support into actual purchasing behaviour. This intention–behaviour gap remains a key challenge for both scholars and practitioners (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021).

Within this context, Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010) has emerged as a critical demographic. Often characterized as digitally native, environmentally aware, and socially conscious, Gen Z is widely regarded as the generation most likely to embrace sustainable consumption (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). At the same time, their purchase decisions are shaped by rapid trends, social media, and structural constraints such as affordability and product availability—factors that may limit their ability to act on their values (Kaur & Bhardwaj, 2021; Vishnoi et al., 2025). In countries like India, where sustainable fashion options remain relatively niche and often premium-priced, these tensions are especially pronounced (Prashar & Kaushal, 2025).

Although existing research has examined drivers of sustainable clothing consumption, much of it employs quantitative, theory-driven models. These approaches, while useful for prediction, often reduce complex experiences to predefined constructs and overlook the nuances of consumer meaning-making (Hjertquist & Jung, 2020). There is a need for qualitative, exploratory research that listens

directly to Gen Z's voices and captures how they themselves interpret and negotiate sustainability in their clothing choices.

Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative, inductive approach to explore Gen Z's perspectives on sustainable clothing in urban India. Rather than testing predefined constructs, it seeks to understand how participants themselves make sense of sustainable fashion, what factors shape their willingness or reluctance to purchase such products, and how they reconcile their environmental values with everyday consumption practices. The study is guided by the following broad research questions:

- RQ1: How do Gen Z consumers in India perceive and experience sustainable clothing?
- RQ2: What factors influence their willingness or reluctance to purchase sustainable fashion?
- RQ3: How do they navigate tensions between environmental values and actual purchase decisions?

By centering the lived experiences of Gen Z, this study offers culturally grounded insights into sustainable clothing consumption and generates evidence that can inform both theory development and practice.

2. Literature Review

The fashion industry is widely recognized as one of the most polluting and resource-intensive sectors globally, contributing significantly to carbon emissions, water consumption, and textile waste (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). In response, sustainable clothing has emerged as a potential remedy, encompassing environmentally friendly materials, ethical labor practices, and circular business models such as recycling, upcycling, and resale (Henninger et al., 2016; Fletcher & Tham, 2019). Despite increasing awareness and the proliferation of sustainable fashion options, a consistent pattern has been observed: consumers often express pro-sustainability attitudes but make comparatively few sustainable purchases. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the intention–behaviour gap, has been documented across diverse contexts (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Understanding how consumers perceive, experience, and rationalize this gap is critical for both theoretical development and practical interventions in the fashion sector. Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, represents a distinctive cohort with unique characteristics relevant to sustainable consumption. This generation is frequently described as digitally native, socially conscious, and environmentally aware (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Henninger et al., 2016). They actively participate in online discourses around climate change, ethical business practices, and brand responsibility, positioning themselves as potential leaders of a “conscious consumption” movement (El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025). Yet, despite these pro-environmental aspirations, research highlights notable contradictions in their actual behaviour. Gen Z often faces competing pressures from rapidly shifting fashion trends, the need for affordability, and the convenience of fast fashion platforms (Vishnoi et al., 2025; Prashar & Kaushal, 2025; Edberg & Köhnlein, 2025). These tensions are particularly acute in emerging economies such as India, where sustainable clothing options remain limited, frequently priced at a premium, and not always widely accessible (Awasthi & Swami, 2023). This combination of high awareness and structural constraints makes the exploration of Gen Z's sustainable fashion behaviour especially pertinent.

Beyond individual attitudes and ethical considerations, social and cultural influences strongly shape clothing decisions. Peers, family members, and online communities act as reference groups, providing cues about what is desirable, socially acceptable, or aspirational (Wang, 2017). Recent studies have highlighted the dual nature of social validation and influencer culture: while exposure to sustainability-oriented influencers can encourage eco-friendly choices, broader social media trends and aspirational lifestyles may also reinforce fast fashion consumption (Naderi & Van Steenburg, 2018; El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025). However, current research largely focuses on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how Gen Z in non-Western, emerging economies—such as India—perceives, negotiates, and balances these social pressures in their daily clothing choices (Vishnoi et

al., 2025). Exploring these dynamics could illuminate context-specific barriers and motivators that quantitative surveys often overlook.

A third critical dimension involves the interplay of knowledge, values, and identity in shaping sustainable fashion consumption. Consumers' understanding of what constitutes "sustainable" clothing is often uneven and complicated by issues such as greenwashing, where brands misrepresent environmental claims (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Apaolaza et al., 2023; Policarpo et al., 2023). Environmental concern has been consistently linked to sustainable consumption (Zeng et al., 2023; Ghaffar et al., 2023), and moral identity—the desire to act in ways consistent with one's ethical values—further reinforces pro-environmental choices (Salciuviene et al., 2024; Rana & Solaiman, 2023; Wu & Yang, 2018). Nevertheless, few studies have explored how young consumers explicitly articulate these values in relation to their clothing practices. Qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, are particularly well-suited to uncovering the complex ways in which knowledge, emotional engagement, and identity formation intersect, providing richer insights than surveys alone (Fletcher & Tham, 2019).

Despite extensive research on sustainable clothing, much of the literature relies heavily on quantitative surveys and pre-specified constructs, offering predictive power but limited flexibility to capture context-specific meanings or unanticipated barriers (Henninger et al., 2016; Kaur & Bhardwaj, 2021). There is a notable scarcity of qualitative studies examining Gen Z consumers in India, a population whose sustainability attitudes are often assumed rather than directly explored (Prashar & Kaushal, 2025; Awasthi & Swami, 2023). By prioritizing Gen Z's own narratives, researchers can uncover novel factors, reinterpret existing ones, and generate deeper insights into the lived experience of sustainable fashion consumption. This approach not only addresses the intention–behaviour gap but also contributes to the development of more contextually grounded theories and practical strategies for promoting ethical fashion choices (Fletcher & Tham, 2019).

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to capture the lived experiences and meanings that Generation Z consumers in India attach to sustainable clothing. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to go beyond pre-specified constructs and uncover themes that may not be visible in survey research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, which enabled the selection of individuals who were part of Gen Z (born 1995–2010), had at least some familiarity with the idea of sustainable clothing, and were residing in large Indian cities where such products are more likely to be available. A total of 25 participants (13 female, 12 male) took part in the study. Diversity in educational background and socio-economic status was sought to ensure a range of perspectives. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow flexibility for participants to share their own experiences and stories while still addressing the study's overall aims. Interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and were conducted in English. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide used open-ended prompts such as:

- "Tell me about your experiences with sustainable clothing."
 - "What influences your decision to buy or not buy such products?"
 - "Can you describe a time when you felt conflicted about a clothing purchase?"
- These open prompts encouraged participants to raise issues that mattered to them; themes such as affordability, social media influence, or environmental values surfaced naturally if participants considered them important.

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading.
2. Generating initial codes to capture interesting features across the data set.
3. Searching for themes by grouping related codes.
4. Reviewing themes against the data to ensure coherence.
5. Defining and naming themes to reflect their essence.
6. Producing the report with illustrative participant quotes.

Coding and theme development were managed in NVivo to ensure a transparent and auditable process. To enhance the rigor of the study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were applied:

- Credibility: preliminary interpretations were shared with five participants (member checking) to verify accuracy.
- Transferability: thick description of context and participants allows readers to assess relevance to other settings.
- Dependability: an audit trail of coding decisions was maintained.
- Confirmability: reflexive memos were kept to minimize researcher bias.

4. Findings and Discussion

Through thematic analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with Gen Z consumers in India, four interrelated themes emerged: (1) *Social Influence and Peer Validation*, (2) *Perceived Accessibility and Affordability*, (3) *Environmental Values and Moral Identity*, and (4) *Knowledge–Action Dissonance*. Each theme is presented below with quotations and discussed alongside prior research.

4.1 Social Influence and Peer Validation

The findings reveal that social influence is a decisive factor in shaping Gen Z's engagement with sustainable clothing in India. Participants consistently described friends, online communities, and influencers as primary channels for discovering sustainable fashion. For example, P5 remarked, "I only discovered eco-friendly brands because my friend tagged me in their stories." This highlights that knowledge of sustainable fashion is not solely derived from traditional marketing or informational campaigns, but often transmitted through peer-to-peer interactions in digital spaces.

This observation strongly resonates with the subjective norms component of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which refers to the influence of perceived social expectations on individual intention (Ajzen, 1991). However, the findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that social norms are increasingly digitally mediated. Unlike earlier generations, Gen Z encounters social cues primarily through algorithm-driven platforms, influencer endorsements, and real-time peer engagement. The exposure is both continuous and visual—likes, shares, and comments amplify the visibility of peers' sustainable choices, thereby magnifying their persuasive effect.

Recent studies corroborate this digital shift. For example, Ki and Kim (2019) found that influencer marketing significantly increases young consumers' willingness to engage in sustainable consumption when messages are perceived as authentic. Similarly, Welbeck and Larbi (2025) and Lazaric et al. (2020) highlight that social validation within digital peer networks fosters pro-sustainability behaviour among university students. Our study builds on these findings by showing that the validation loop—peer approval via social media interactions—reinforces not only attitudes but also intentions, thereby serving as a psychological reward for choosing sustainable options.

Nevertheless, the same dynamics can undermine sustainable behaviour. Several participants admitted being swayed toward fast fashion due to peer emphasis on trendiness and affordability. This suggests that subjective norms can operate in conflicting directions, simultaneously promoting and inhibiting sustainable consumption. It underscores Ajzen's (2020) argument that TPB's normative component

is context-dependent: when peer approval favors fast fashion, it competes with sustainability norms. Thus, interventions must strategically leverage digital influencers, peer-led campaigns, and community-based challenges to ensure that sustainable choices become the dominant visible norm.

4.2 Perceived Accessibility and Affordability

Practical barriers emerged as significant deterrents to sustainable clothing adoption, encompassing both economic and logistical dimensions. As P11 explained, “Even if I want to buy sustainable clothes, the shops are far away and online delivery costs extra.” This finding underscores that barriers extend beyond price sensitivity to issues of convenience and reach.

Affordability has long been documented as a major barrier to sustainable consumption (Niinimäki, 2020; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Young consumers, especially students and early-career professionals, often operate within tight budgets, making premium-priced sustainable clothing less viable (Surmacz et al., 2024). However, our data show that affordability is interlinked with accessibility factors—including store location, online presence, and shipping costs—which together shape perceived behavioural control, another key element of TPB.

This dual dimension resonates with findings from Nilsson Vestola and Ek Styvén (2025), who demonstrated that perceived convenience strongly predicts actual sustainable purchasing among youth. Gen Z in India evaluates not just whether sustainable clothing is affordable, but also whether it is practically attainable within their daily consumption routines. As one participant (P14) put it, “It’s easier to just go to the mall and buy fast fashion brands, rather than searching for eco-friendly ones online.”

Such insights enrich the TPB framework by illustrating how perceived behavioural control is contextually shaped by infrastructure and retail ecosystems. While affordability reflects personal financial resources, accessibility reflects structural conditions. Both act as control beliefs that constrain or enable the enactment of pro-sustainability intentions. Consequently, policy interventions such as subsidies, student discounts, integration of sustainable brands into mainstream marketplaces, and last-mile delivery innovations could significantly reduce the perception of difficulty and align intentions with behaviour.

4.3 Environmental Values and Moral Identity

Environmental concern and moral identity emerged as central motivators for sustainable clothing consumption among Gen Z participants. P9 expressed, “It feels wrong to keep buying fast fashion when I know the damage it does.” This illustrates that choices are not purely utilitarian but tied to a sense of ethical responsibility and identity reinforcement.

This finding aligns with prior research that underscores the role of moral obligation in sustainable behaviour (Kang et al., 2013; Li et al., 2022). According to TPB, attitudes toward behaviour are shaped by beliefs about its outcomes (Ajzen, 1991). For Gen Z, these beliefs are intertwined with moral evaluations—purchasing sustainable clothing is not only perceived as environmentally beneficial but also as consistent with their self-concept as responsible individuals. This echoes the argument of de Vries and Carlson (2014), who found that moral identity strongly predicts ethical consumption.

In India, this moral framing is amplified by cultural narratives emphasizing responsibility toward future generations and community well-being. Participants often expressed sustainability as a moral obligation rather than a lifestyle choice. Rana and Solaiman (2023) similarly reported that identity-driven motivations, rather than purely instrumental concerns, were central in shaping young consumers’ willingness to pay for eco-friendly clothing.

By integrating these insights into TPB, the study illustrates that attitudes are value-laden and identity-reinforcing, extending beyond rational cost–benefit assessments. For practitioners, this means sustainable fashion marketing can effectively frame products as both morally imperative and as

markers of socially admired identity. Campaigns highlighting personal integrity, future responsibility, and collective impact may resonate more deeply than purely informational appeals.

4.4 Knowledge–Action Dissonance

Despite strong awareness and positive intentions, participants often admitted to defaulting to fast fashion. P17 confessed, “I know sustainable brands are better, but I still buy from Shein because it’s quick and cheap.” This tension illustrates what we term knowledge–action dissonance, which reflects the well-documented intention–behaviour gap in sustainable consumption (Joy et al., 2012; Kaur & Bhardwaj, 2021).

This theme underscores the limitations of awareness-based interventions. Although participants recognized the harmful effects of fast fashion and valued sustainability, these cognitions were insufficient to overcome the combined pressures of affordability, accessibility, and peer influence. In TPB terms, while attitudes and intentions were favorable, both subjective norms and perceived behavioural control often worked against sustainable action, leading to dissonance.

The persistence of this gap has been documented in multiple contexts. Simango (2024) emphasized that the dissonance is particularly acute among younger consumers, who are highly aware of environmental issues yet constrained by cost and trend-driven pressures. Our findings extend this understanding to the Indian context, showing that structural barriers intersect with digital social pressures to intensify the gap.

This suggests that closing the gap requires multi-dimensional strategies. Merely enhancing awareness is insufficient; instead, approaches must simultaneously reduce barriers (through subsidies, convenient access), amplify enabling norms (peer-driven social marketing), and strengthen identity alignment (positioning sustainable fashion as aspirational). Addressing knowledge–action dissonance thus requires interventions at both structural and psychological levels.

Collectively, these findings illustrate that Gen Z’s sustainable clothing behaviour in India is shaped by the dynamic interaction of social influence, practical constraints, moral identity, and knowledge–action dissonance. While digital peer networks amplify awareness and intention, structural barriers such as cost and access often inhibit actual behaviour. The interplay of these factors underscores the need for holistic strategies that combine social, economic, and identity-based approaches to close the intention–behaviour gap among young consumers.

5. Implications

This study carries significant implications for both practice and theory, offering nuanced insights into how Gen Z in India navigates sustainable clothing consumption.

5.1 Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, our findings highlight that although Indian Gen Z consumers exhibit strong moral and environmental values, their ability to act on these values is frequently constrained by affordability and accessibility barriers (Harris et al., 2016; Vishwakarma et al., 2024). Pervasive price sensitivity and limited access to sustainable fashion outlets suggest that brands must go beyond merely offering eco-friendly products. One practical approach is to design entry-level sustainable lines that are competitively priced and transparently produced. Clearly communicating the social and environmental impact of these products can enhance perceived value, making ethical choices more tangible and attainable for young consumers. Such transparency not only strengthens consumer trust but also helps address the knowledge–action gap observed in our study, enabling intentions to more effectively translate into actual behaviour. Equally important is the role of digital peer validation in shaping consumption (Lidgren & Major, 2021). Participants repeatedly cited social media, influencer content, and peer endorsements as primary triggers for exploring sustainable fashion. This suggests that brands can leverage credible micro-influencers, promote authentic user-generated content, and

foster online communities to reinforce normative support for sustainable choices. By embedding sustainable messaging within peer networks, brands can create social reinforcement mechanisms that make ethical consumption both aspirational and socially validated.

At a policy level, structural barriers such as limited distribution, high prices, and lack of consumer awareness remain critical constraints (Diddi et al., 2019). Interventions such as subsidies for sustainable fabrics, tax incentives for ethical production, and large-scale educational campaigns emphasizing collective environmental benefits could help reduce these barriers. Policies that facilitate accessibility, affordability, and knowledge dissemination would empower Gen Z to act on their pro-sustainability intentions more consistently, thereby bridging the intention–behaviour gap.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by demonstrating how its core constructs—subjective norms and perceived behavioural control— are refracted through digital environments and economic constraints. Our findings highlight that for Gen Z, normative influence is not confined to face-to-face interactions (Ho et al., 2008) but is co-constructed in algorithmically mediated social media networks. Similarly, perceived behavioural control is shaped not only by individual capacity but also by structural and logistical considerations such as affordability, distribution, and online availability.

Two emergent constructs—digital peer validation and knowledge–action dissonance—further enrich existing models of sustainable consumption. Digital peer validation captures the role of social media and influencer networks in shaping both awareness and intention, while knowledge–action dissonance illustrates the persistent gap between ethical awareness and actual behaviour in real-world contexts. Together, these constructs suggest that traditional behavioural frameworks must be adapted to account for generational and cultural specificities, particularly in emerging markets where structural and social factors exert unique pressures on young consumers.

Thus, the study underscores the need for an integrated approach to promoting sustainable fashion—one that combines managerial innovation, policy support, and theoretical refinement—to effectively translate Gen Z’s environmental concern into consistent and impactful consumer behaviour.

6. Future Research and Scope

This study provides foundational insights into the factors shaping sustainable clothing consumption among Indian Gen Z, yet several avenues remain open for future investigation. First, while this research focused on qualitative narratives to explore subjective experiences and perceptions, future studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches to quantify the relative influence of different TPB constructs—attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control—on actual purchasing behaviour. Such designs could also examine the moderating roles of demographic variables, including gender, income, and urban versus rural residence, which may influence the intention–behaviour gap. Second, this study highlights the importance of digital peer validation and social media influence. Future research could explore how specific digital platforms, influencer types (micro vs. macro), and content formats (videos, stories, reviews) differentially impact sustainable consumption. Longitudinal studies may reveal whether these online behaviours translate into consistent, sustainable practices over time or remain episodic and trend-driven. Third, comparative studies across generations and cultural contexts could enrich the understanding of how the intention-behaviour gap manifests differently. For instance, comparing Indian Millennials and Gen Z, or cross-cultural comparisons between India and other emerging or developed markets, could uncover generational or cultural nuances in moral identity, social influence, and perceived behavioural control. Fourth, structural and systemic factors warrant further exploration. While this study identified affordability and accessibility as key constraints, future research could investigate how policy interventions (subsidies, tax incentives, or regulatory measures) and organizational strategies (transparent supply chains, circular

business models) affect both intentions and actual behaviour. Experiments or field studies could evaluate which interventions most effectively bridge the intention–behaviour gap in real-world contexts.

Finally, emerging themes such as knowledge–action dissonance invite deeper theoretical exploration. Future research could refine behavioural models, such as TPB or the Norm Activation Model, by incorporating constructs specific to digital ecosystems, peer-driven influence, and identity alignment. Expanding these frameworks can improve predictive power and offer actionable insights for brands, policymakers, and educators aiming to promote sustainable consumption among younger generations.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative exploration of Gen Z's engagement with sustainable clothing reveals a nuanced interplay between values, social expectations, and structural constraints. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study identified four interconnected themes: peer validation and social media influence, affordability and accessibility barriers, moral identity and environmental values, and knowledge–action dissonance. Together, these themes depict a generation that aspires to act sustainably but navigates competing pressures of cost, convenience, and online social norms.

The study contributes new, context-specific knowledge about how Indian Gen Z consumers construct meaning around sustainable fashion and how their intention–behaviour gap is shaped by digital environments and affordability issues. For practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of offering affordable, transparent, and socially endorsed sustainable options. For researchers, the results highlight the value of inductive, culturally grounded approaches for refining existing behavioural models. By addressing these factors, both marketers and policymakers can help reduce the barriers that prevent Gen Z from translating their sustainability values into actual purchasing behaviour, thereby advancing more responsible consumption patterns in the fashion sector.

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