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## International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology (IJMRSET)

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# Sustainability as a Real Concern or Social Trend among Generation Z: A Study on Consumer Perception and Purchasing Behavior

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### ABSTRACT:

**Purpose:** This study examines whether sustainability represents a genuine environmental concern or merely a social trend among Generation Z consumers, while analyzing the influence of sustainability awareness, social media, price sensitivity, and the attitude–behavior gap on purchasing behavior.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, collecting primary data from 150 Generation Z respondents through a structured 20-item questionnaire. Statistical techniques including descriptive analysis, independent samples t-test, Pearson's correlation, one-way ANOVA, and chi-square tests were applied using Python to examine relationships between key variables.

**Findings:** The results reveal that Gen Z holds dual, simultaneous perceptions of sustainability – recognizing it as both a genuine concern ( $M = 3.49$ ) and a social trend ( $M = 3.55$ ). A significant attitude–behavior gap was confirmed, with awareness not translating into behavioral change. Price sensitivity emerged as a major barrier to sustainable purchasing. No significant differences were found across gender, academic level, or field of study, confirming sustainability perception as a generational cohort-level phenomenon.

**Originality/Value:** This study contributes to sustainability and consumer behavior literature by demonstrating the coexistence of intrinsic and extrinsic sustainability motivations within the same Gen Z cohort. By integrating awareness, social influence, economic factors, greenwashing skepticism, and behavioral outcomes into a unified framework, the research offers nuanced insights for marketers and policymakers targeting the Indian Gen Z segment.

**KEYWORDS:** Sustainability; Generation Z; Consumer Perception; Purchasing Behavior; Attitude–Behavior Gap; Social Media; Greenwashing; Price Sensitivity; Indian Market

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented environmental challenges, including climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss. These concerns have elevated sustainability from a corporate initiative to a strategic imperative across businesses, governments, and consumers. Among all consumer segments, Generation Z (born 1997–2012) has emerged as particularly significant in sustainability discourse, given their digital nativity, social awareness, and exposure to global environmental issues through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Despite widespread portrayal as environmentally conscious consumers, Generation Z's actual purchasing behavior does not always align with their stated values – a phenomenon termed the attitude–behavior gap. The growing influence of social media has further complicated this landscape, normalizing sustainability as a socially visible behavior and raising questions about whether Gen Z's sustainability orientation is authentically internalized or primarily performative.

Additionally, practical constraints such as price sensitivity, product availability, and greenwashing skepticism mediate the relationship between environmental awareness and actual purchasing decisions. This is especially relevant in emerging markets like India, where disposable income among Gen Z students remains limited. The present study therefore aims to critically examine whether sustainability is a genuine concern influencing Gen Z purchasing behavior in India, or predominantly a social trend shaped by digital culture and peer influence.



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### II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Sustainability has become a central factor in modern consumer decision-making. Peattie (2010) notes that sustainability marketing has evolved into mainstream business strategy, while Ottman (2011) argues that consumers increasingly support brands demonstrating genuine environmental commitment. However, Carrington et al. (2014) document a persistent gap between ethical intentions and actual purchasing behavior, driven by price, convenience, and product availability.

Generation Z is widely characterized as value-driven and sustainability-oriented. Francis and Hoefel (2018) emphasize that Gen Z expects brands to take credible stands on social and environmental issues, while Dabija et al. (2019) confirm higher sustainability inclination among Gen Z compared to older generations, albeit moderated by affordability concerns. Priporas et al. (2020) highlight a consistent tension between Gen Z's environmental idealism and pragmatic purchasing constraints.

Social media amplifies sustainability awareness but simultaneously introduces the phenomenon of 'performative sustainability' (Vredenburg et al., 2020), where eco-friendly behaviors are adopted for social visibility rather than genuine concern. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) confirm influencer-driven sustainability messaging as particularly potent among young consumers. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior explains the gap between positive attitudes and behavior through perceived behavioral control and subjective norms. Gleim et al. (2013) and Biswas and Roy (2015) identify price as the primary barrier, while Delmas and Burbano (2011) and Chen and Chang (2013) document greenwashing's erosion of consumer trust.

**H1:** There is a significant difference in environmental impact consideration between male and female Gen Z respondents.

**H2:** There is a significant difference in willingness to pay eco-premium between PG and UG students.

**H3:** Social media influence is positively associated with active information-seeking about sustainability.

**H4:** Perception of sustainability as a social trend is positively associated with actual change in purchasing decisions.

**H5:** Purchase frequency significantly affects willingness to pay a premium for eco-friendly products.

**H6:** Field of study is significantly associated with the belief that sustainability is a genuine Gen Z concern.

### III. METHODOLOGY AND MEASUREMENT

#### Data Collection and Sample

A quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive-cum-explanatory research design was adopted, grounded in a positivist research philosophy. Primary data were collected through a structured 20-item questionnaire administered to 150 Generation Z respondents – students aged 18–27 years enrolled across disciplines in India. The questionnaire was distributed through online platforms (Google Forms via WhatsApp, Instagram, and email) and validated through a two-stage pretesting process involving academic expert review and a small pilot group.

The study targets digitally active Gen Z consumers in urban and semi-urban settings, where exposure to sustainability-related information and eco-friendly products is relatively higher. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed. Demographic representation includes postgraduate students (74.7%), males (52.7%), and predominantly Commerce/MBA students (56.7%), with the majority in the 21–23 age group (51.3%). Secondary data from Deloitte (2024), NIQ (2024), Opeepl (2024), and peer-reviewed literature provide a comparative market context for interpreting findings.

#### Measurement of Constructs

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Sustainability Awareness captures respondents' knowledge of eco-claims, environmental impact consideration, and trust in eco-labels (Q6, Q8, Q10, Q11, Q20). Greenwashing Skepticism measures belief in brand claims and trend perception (Q7, Q12, Q17). Purchase Behavior reflects eco-premium willingness, active information-seeking, and actual behavioral change (Q9, Q16, Q18). Social Influence captures social media's role in driving eco-purchases and influencer following (Q13, Q14, Q15). Statistical analysis employed Python (pandas, NumPy, SciPy) with t-tests, Pearson's correlation, one-way ANOVA, and chi-square tests at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .



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### IV. RESULTS

#### Demographic Profile

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 150)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–20 years	14	9.3%
	21–23 years	77	51.3%
	24–26 years	46	30.7%
	27+ years	13	8.7%
Gender	Male	79	52.7%
	Female	60	40.0%
	Prefer not to say	11	7.3%
Level of Study	Postgraduate (PG)	112	74.7%
	Undergraduate (UG)	25	16.7%
	Doctoral/PhD	9	6.0%
Purchase Frequency	Few times/month or less	53	35.3%
	Once a week	38	25.3%
	Several times/week	36	24.0%
	Daily	23	15.3%

#### Descriptive Statistics – Sustainability Perception Items

**Table 2: Key Descriptive Statistics for Likert Items (N = 150)**

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
Q6	Aware of sustainability claims by brands	3.35	0.91
Q7	Believe brand sustainability claims are genuinely true	2.76	1.05
Q9	Willing to pay premium for eco-friendly products	2.78	1.06
Q12	Sustainability is a genuine concern for Gen Z	3.49	0.99
Q13	Social media drives my sustainability purchases	3.57	0.96
Q16	Actively seek sustainability info before purchasing	2.89	1.05
Q17	Sustainability is more a social trend than real concern	3.55	0.95
Q18	Changed a purchase due to poor environmental record	2.70	1.05
Q19	Govt. should mandate sustainability reporting	3.82	0.90



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The descriptive findings reveal a compelling duality: respondents simultaneously endorsed sustainability as a genuine concern (Q12,  $M = 3.49$ ) and as a social trend (Q17,  $M = 3.55$ ). The highest-scoring item across the entire study was government regulatory mandates (Q19,  $M = 3.82$ ), signaling a structurally-conscious generation that favors systemic solutions over individual behavioral change. Deep greenwashing skepticism is evident (Q7,  $M = 2.76$ ), while eco-premium willingness remains below the neutral midpoint (Q9,  $M = 2.78$ ), consistent with the Opeepl (2024) finding that 56% of Gen Z globally cite higher product costs as the primary eco-purchasing barrier.

### Hypothesis Testing Results

**Table 3: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results**

Hyp.	Method	Statistic	p-value	Decision
H1 (Gender × Env. Consideration)	t-Test	$t(137) = -0.343$	0.732	$H_0$ Accepted
H2 (Education × Eco-Premium)	t-Test	$t(135) = 0.360$	0.719	$H_0$ Accepted
H3 (Social Media × Info-Seeking)	Pearson's r	$r = -0.022$	0.791	$H_0$ Accepted
H4 (Social Trend × Purchase Change)	Pearson's r	$r = 0.105$	0.201	$H_0$ Accepted
H5 (Purchase Freq. × Eco-Premium)	One-Way ANOVA	$F(3,146) = 2.240$	0.086	$H_0$ Accepted (trend)
H6 (Field of Study × Genuine Concern)	Chi-Square	$\chi^2(6) = 6.829$	0.337	$H_0$ Accepted

None of the six hypotheses achieved statistical significance at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The uniform non-significance across demographic sub-groups (H1, H2, H6) confirms that sustainability perception is a cohort-level generational phenomenon evenly distributed across gender, academic level, and field of study – consistent with Deloitte (2024) and PDI (2023) global findings. The attitude-behavior gaps in H3 and H4 confirm that social media engagement does not generate substantive research behavior, and acknowledging sustainability as a trend does not predict behavioral change. H5 registered a near-significant trend ( $p = 0.086$ ), with daily buyers showing the lowest eco-premium willingness ( $M = 2.30$ ) versus infrequent buyers ( $M = 2.98$ ), aligning with behavioral economics research on price-anchoring effects.

### Composite Construct Analysis

**Table 4: Composite Construct Correlation Matrix (Pearson's r) | N = 150**

Composite Dimension	Sustainability Awareness	Greenwashing Skepticism	Purchase Behavior	Social Influence
Sustainability Awareness	1.000	0.036	-0.033	0.005
Greenwashing Skepticism	0.036	1.000	0.262*	0.041
Purchase Behavior	-0.033	0.262*	1.000	-0.162
Social Influence	0.005	0.041	-0.162	1.000

Note: \*Significant at 0.05 level. Awareness composites: Q6,Q8,Q10,Q11,Q20; Skepticism: Q7,Q12,Q17; Purchase: Q9,Q16,Q18; Social: Q13,Q14,Q15



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The most notable finding is the significant relationship between Greenwashing Skepticism and Purchase Behavior ( $r = 0.262$ ), suggesting that skeptical consumers engage in more deliberate purchase research. Social Influence showed a weak negative correlation with Purchase Behavior ( $r = -0.162$ ), reinforcing that social media-driven sustainability engagement does not translate into deeper behavioral commitment.

### V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study identifies six key findings. First, Gen Z demonstrates moderate-to-high sustainability awareness (Awareness block  $M \approx 3.26$ ), yet awareness does not translate into behavioral action. Second, a significant attitude–behavior gap exists, with active info-seeking (Q16,  $M = 2.89$ ) and actual purchase changes (Q18,  $M = 2.70$ ) falling below the neutral midpoint despite positive attitudes. Third, price sensitivity is the primary structural barrier, with eco-premium willingness below the midpoint (Q9,  $M = 2.78$ ), consistent with global benchmarks. Fourth, social media significantly shapes sustainability perceptions (Q13,  $M = 3.57$ ) but fails to drive information-seeking or behavioral change. Fifth, greenwashing skepticism is pervasive (Q7,  $M = 2.76$ ), making transparency and verified claims essential for brand credibility. Sixth, and most significantly, Gen Z simultaneously perceives sustainability as both a genuine concern and a social trend – not as contradictory views but as concurrent realities of their consumer culture.

For marketers, the findings recommend prioritizing substantive, verifiable sustainability communication through eco-labels and certifications over aesthetic or trend-aligned messaging. Products should be positioned to reduce the price-quality trade-off, as economic constraints remain the dominant barrier. Social media strategies should shift from passive content exposure to active engagement and education. For policymakers, standardized sustainability reporting mandates – strongly endorsed by respondents (Q19,  $M = 3.82$ ) – would enhance market transparency and reduce greenwashing. Financial incentives such as subsidies can help reduce the cost differential for sustainable products. Educational institutions should integrate sustainability into curricula to deepen behavioral commitment beyond social performance.

### VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that sustainability among Generation Z in India is neither purely a genuine concern nor merely a passing trend – it functions as both simultaneously. Gen Z demonstrates strong awareness and positive intent, but behavioral transformation remains limited by economic, social, and structural barriers. The defining contribution of the study is its empirical demonstration of this dual perception: the coexistence of intrinsic environmental values and extrinsic social conformity pressures within the same consumer cohort.

Theoretically, the findings advance understanding of the attitude–behavior gap in sustainability by identifying greenwashing skepticism – not awareness – as the construct most meaningfully associated with purchase behavior ( $r = 0.262$ ). This suggests that future research should focus on trust and credibility mechanisms rather than awareness interventions. The absence of significant demographic differences across all six hypotheses confirms a paradigm shift: sustainability orientation is now a generational characteristic of Gen Z rather than a segment-specific phenomenon.

Practically, organizations must adopt integrated approaches combining perception-building through transparency, engagement-driven digital strategies, and price accessibility. AI and digital technologies offer significant potential for providing consumers with verifiable sustainability information at the point of purchase, potentially bridging the gap between awareness and action. Bridging this gap is no longer optional – as Gen Z enters peak spending power, their dual demand for genuine sustainability and systemic accountability will fundamentally reshape consumption norms.

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