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Evaluating Generation Z's purchasing behavior of eco-friendly clothing in the UK through The Theory of Planned Behavior

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Abstract: This study examines Generation Z's purchasing behavior in the UK toward eco-friendly clothing using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). It explores how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence their willingness to pay for sustainable apparel. The role of social media and peer influence is analyzed, highlighting how digital platforms shape consumption habits. Findings indicate that subjective norms and perceived behavioral control strongly impact purchase intentions, while pricing remains a key barrier. The study also addresses greenwashing concerns, emphasizing the need for transparent sustainability practices to build consumer trust. Marketing strategies should focus on influencer partnerships, personalized branding, and digital engagement, while policy recommendations stress affordable pricing, supply chain transparency, and regulatory measures to drive sustainable fashion adoption.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion; Generation Z, eco-friendly clothing; Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB); Consumer behavior; Social media influence

List of abbreviations:

TPB -The Theory of Planned Behavior

SOM- Social media

Gen Z- Generation Z

1. Introduction

The apparel industry is a traditional sector with a history spanning several centuries. Sustainability trends have been integrated into the industry, with companies such as H&M, Uniqlo, and Bosideng actively adopting eco-friendly materials. Sustainability has become one of the dominant trends in the industry due to growing concerns over global climate change and resource depletion, which have heightened environmental awareness among consumers and businesses. Additionally, the garment industry significantly contributes to global water pollution, with textile processing chemicals causing severe environmental and health issues (Scott, 2016). The fast fashion culture in the UK fashion industry results in over-consumption of resources and ecological degradation (Claudio, 2007). However, with the intensification of environmental issues, young women are increasingly adopting sustainable fashion. According to Su et al. (2019), young people's understanding of clothing sustainability and their values significantly influence their willingness to purchase sustainable clothing. This suggests that sustainable consumption plays an important role in their purchasing decisions. The study focused on Gen Z in the UK, a group often seen as digital natives with a high level of environmental awareness and social responsibility. Surveys of young women in the UK have shown that Gen Z consumers are willing to pay up to 25% for sustainable clothing. This shows that Gen Z is willing to use consumer behavior to express their values and beliefs.

2. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

2.1 Overview and Critical Analysis

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) is a theoretical framework for predicting human behavior proposed by Ajzen in social psychology. According to TPB theory, behavioral intention is influenced by three factors: attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

According to Ajzen (1991) 's Theory of Planned Behavior, behavioral attitude is an individual's evaluation of a specific behavior, reflecting whether the individual thinks the behavior is beneficial or valuable. Subjective norms are an individual's perception of social pressure to

engage in a certain behavior. Perceived behavioral control reflects the influence of individual beliefs. TPB has been widely used in various fields such as environmental science, waste management, green consumption and sustainable transportation (Si et al., 2019). Zulfikar et al. (2023) argue that TPB provides a powerful framework for analyzing green consumer behavior and highlights intent as a key determinant, while demonstrating that predictive users can influence online video services. Truong (2008). found that perceived behavior control is the most important influence on user intention. In addition, TPB has been applied to technology adoption (Jokonya, 2017) and mental health seeking intentions (Adams et al., 2022). However, the TPB theory faces several key limitations. The model emphasizes intention as a central predictor of behavior, which oversimplifies the complexity of human behavior (Ajzen, 2011). For example, habits are automatic goal-oriented behaviors through which people can change their psychology (Aarts and Dijksterhuis, 2000). Furthermore, Ulker-Demirel and Ciftci (2020) point out that due to feasibility and scope constraints, there is limited attention to the contextual and cultural factors that influence decision making in these areas, such as culture and tourism. Despite these criticisms, TPB theory still provides valuable insights into understanding consumer behavior (Zulfikar et al., 2023).

2.2 Analysis of Segmented Audience Groups

Research shows that positive attitudes toward eco-friendly clothing significantly influence purchase intentions, with consumers often willing to pay a premium (Cowan and Kinley, 2014). Trust in sustainable practices, labeling transparency, and eco-conscious attitudes drive purchases (Dhir et al., 2020). However, barriers remain, as many consumers prioritize price, aesthetics, and fit over sustainability (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018). Fashion choices reflect social class and identity, with social pressures shaping apparel decisions (Crane, 2000). In collectivist cultures, endorsements from peers and online communities encourage sustainable purchases. Gen Z, highly influenced by social norms, adopts eco-friendly clothing to align with group values. Family expectations also play a role, as UK Gen Z is influenced by sustainability-focused household norms. Exposure to sustainability content on Instagram and TikTok further reinforces green fashion choices. Financial resources, accessibility, and knowledge affect sustainable clothing purchases. High prices deter many, though some consumers are willing to pay more for eco-friendly options (Laroche et al., 2001). For Gen Z, price sensitivity remains a key barrier to sustainable fashion adoption.

2.3 Contribution to consumer behavior change and improvement

Young consumers with strong environmental awareness prefer products that reflect their values. According to the TPB, individuals with positive attitudes toward a behavior are more likely to engage in it. For Gen Z, sustainable fashion is both an expression of identity and a commitment to environmental responsibility. Brands leveraging SOM can strengthen their influence on Gen Z. Partnering with sustainability-focused influencers expands reach and reinforces eco-friendly commitments. Alo Yoga, founded in 2007 in Los Angeles, exemplifies this strategy by collaborating with yoga influencers and streaming live sessions. Known for stylish, high-quality apparel, the brand aligns with Gen Z's values, blending sustainability, style, and functionality (Brand Vision, 2024). Gen Z's strong environmental beliefs and self-efficacy influence their purchasing choices. They prioritize sustainability, with most willing to pay 10% more for eco-friendly products (First Insight, 2022). A McKinsey survey found over 60% of Gen Z consumers globally prefer sustainable brands and feel peer pressure to make greener choices (McKinsey & Company, 2020). SOM and peer influence further drive their decisions, with 75% of Depop's Gen Z users buying second-hand goods to reduce consumption (Depop, 2020). Circular fashion models like resale and rental are expected to grow, with Gen Z projected to account for 28% of the second-hand market by 2027 (THREDUP, 2023). However, cost remains a major barrier. Sustainable products often have higher prices due to ethical labor practices and eco-friendly production, with sustainable clothing costing 75–85% more than conventional alternatives (Kearney, 2020). Additionally, greenwashing undermines consumer trust. Companies that exaggerate sustainability efforts risk brand damage, with every 1% increase in greenwashing leading to a 0.56% decline in brand value (Pimonenko et al., 2020). Greater transparency is needed to maintain trust and encourage sustainable consumption.

3. Future impact

The Six Pillar Framework (Inayatullah, 2008) provides a structured approach to understanding and shaping Gen Z's sustainable fashion choices in the UK. With growing environmental awareness, they prefer brands that align with their values. Marketers will leverage influencers and technology to make eco-friendly clothing more affordable and desirable. Transparency in supply chains is increasingly important. Market research helps identify sustainable innovations, such as clothing rental and recycling programs (Chen et al., 2021) which are gaining traction. Stricter UK regulations and global climate concerns will further push green consumption into the mainstream. Brands should take the lead by obtaining green certifications and sharing sustainability data (Vogel, 2003). Marketing strategies should emphasize storytelling, showcasing how brands reduce resource consumption and drive sustainability. SOM engagement, such as Instagram Q&As, can help brands understand consumer expectations. However, regulatory barriers and limited awareness slow adoption. Targeted marketing and technological advancements, including virtual try-ons and customizable designs, can encourage eco-friendly fashion choices. Gen Z

seeks both social impact and personalization. To meet these expectations, brands can set sustainability goals, such as carbon neutrality by 2030. Blockchain-based IoT can ensure transparency in garment production, transportation, and distribution (Pal and Yasar, 2020), reinforcing consumer trust in sustainable fashion.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the aim of this study was to assess the impact of the TPB theory on Gen Z's purchasing of eco-friendly clothing. The data from the current study found that all three factors of the TPB model positively impacted on Gen Z's eco-friendly clothing purchasing behaviour in the UK, with subjective norms and perceived behavioural control exerting a relatively strong influence. Therefore, marketers must design effective programs to communicate environmental knowledge to consumers and improve supply chain transparency to educate them on the benefits of green clothing. In collectivist societies, where consumers' purchase intentions are influenced by others, social platforms should be utilized by marketers to promote their products, given Gen Z's high engagement with SOM. Endorsements of eco-friendly apparel campaigns by celebrities may generate positive attitudes. For the income level of Gen Z, environmentally friendly clothing should be provided at a reasonable price, or a "trade-in" program should be implemented to lower the consumption threshold. In addition, marketers of green brands should highlight Gen Z's personality and needs through customized services and use digital platforms and technologies to increase the convenience of the consumption process. However, there are limitations to using TPB theory to study consumer behavior. The TPB framework uses a single classification and measurement specification and cannot fully capture the diversity of social influences. For example, factors such as gender, emotions, and social circles are not considered. In addition, issues such as price, availability, and product quality, all of which are also affected by external factors such as the brand itself and policy incentives.

In the future, the UK green clothing market has great growth potential, and Gen Z is expected to become the largest consumer group. Green brands are increasingly focusing on education, promotion, pricing and innovation, linking the emotional dynamics of Gen Z, and developing services based on the personality of Gen Z to ensure that the TPB framework is effectively applied to Gen Z in the UK. At the same time, brands should implement transparent sustainable production practices and work with trusted influencer partners to attract long-term and stable consumer groups and enhance customer stickiness. Brands need to target consumer needs, rely on government policy support and technological progress, implement more efficient marketing strategies, and contribute to the continued growth of the UK eco-friendly clothing market and green environmental protection.

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