How Environmental Concern Influences Ethical Consumption Decisions Among Young Consumers

Bratati Das[1*], Dr. Madhu Bala Roy[2]

[1*]State Aided College Teacher, Panihati Mahavidyalaya; Research Scholar, Department of Management, Techno India University, West Bengal. Email Id- bdbratati@gmail.com
[2]Associate Professor, Department of Management, Techno India University, West Bengal. Email Id- madhubala.r@technoindiaeducation.com

ABSTRACT
Environmental degradation, climate change, and resource depletion have increased consumer awareness regarding sustainable and ethical consumption practices. With the increasing rise in environmental and conscious consumerism, the youth (Generation Z and young Millennials) is one of the critical market segments. The present article investigates the environmental concerns of young consumers and their impact on their ethical consumer behaviour. It implemented a qualitative secondary data approach, in which the most recent academic literature and scholarly sources about the following topics that are available online were retrieved: environmental concern, green purchasing, ethical consumption and sustainable consumer behaviour. Literature was analysed theoretically to look for similar patterns and relationships found in the literature. The data indicated that environmental concern was a significant factor when it comes to ethical consumption, which includes environmental awareness, ethical consciousness, perceived responsibility, and willingness to promote sustainable products and brands. The practice of ethical purchasing also faces several barriers, such as greenwashing consciousness, price sensitivity and lack of access to products. This research contributes to knowledge of younger generations' understanding of sustainable consumption and makes it possible to draw implications for companies attempting to promote consumption behaviour that is moral and sustainable.

Keywords: Environmental Concern, Ethical Consumption, Young Consumers, Sustainable Consumption, Green Purchasing, Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability is among the most critical concerns of the world in the 21st century. Increased climate change awareness, pollution, biodiversity loss and resource depletion have led to changes by individuals, government and organisations to be more sustainable. The consumers are a critical stakeholder in sustainability, and are responsible for making ecologically aware choices while purchasing, so that production effects and environmental damage are kept to a minimum. Therefore, research on ethical consumer behaviour has become a relevant field of the study of consumer behaviour. Ethical consumption is purchasing and making food decisions based on moral, social and environmental considerations as well as economic ones. Ethical consumers might be more likely to purchase products that are eco-friendly, socially responsible, and produced sustainably. Responsible consumption behaviour is a crucial aspect of sustainable development goals and empowerment of lifestyles that are eco-friendly (Nangia et al., 2024). Generation Z consumers are more interested in sustainability-related issues and inclined to support ethical and environmentally friendly brands, as evident from their increasing interest.

The concept of environmental concern is an awareness and extent of concern regarding environmental impact. Previous research showed that environmental concern has positive impacts on green purchasing intention and sustainable consumption behaviour (Zeng et al., 2023; Alam et al., 2023). Highly valued environmental consumers, ethical consumers and consumers involved in green initiatives are more likely to respond positively among young consumers with high environmental values. This study by Le et al. (2022) revealed that consumers' ethical behaviours were strongly influenced by environmental concern in their lives among consumers from Generation Z. In spite of the lack of awareness, the connection between the environment and real ethical consumption is not easy. These factors may impact the decision-making process related to purchasing a product, namely the perceived product quality, low price sensitivity, greenwashing perception, and brand credibility (Sun & Yoon, 2022; Lu et al., 2022). Furthermore, usage of sustainability-related marketing strategies has also become more common in marketing, as businesses try to attract consumers who care about environmental issues, and there is a need to appreciate the connection between the level of consumers' environmental concerns and consumers' ethical conduct during product and/or service consumption. Moreover, sustainability has stimulated growing interest in sustainability-oriented marketing approaches that target the green consumers; knowledge is required regarding consumers' environmental concern involvement and consumers' ethical behaviour in product and service consumption.

The effect of environmental concern on moral consumption ethic choices in the morals of young consumers will be investigated by applying secondary qualitative research techniques. The objective of the study is to draw policy conclusions from the latest literature that leads to a holistic picture of the factors, motivations and hurdles that drive ethical purchasing. Frequent knowledge of such relationships can guide the development of a sustainable business model (SBM) in business, policy, and marketing that is capable of satisfying younger consumers' expectations and values.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relationship between environmental concern and ethical consumption among young consumers.
- To identify the factors that encourage environmentally concerned young consumers to engage in ethical purchasing behavior.
- To explore barriers affecting ethical consumption decisions despite environmental awareness.
- To provide recommendations for businesses seeking to promote sustainable and ethical consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable consumption patterns have become one of the key factors of concern for the environment. Alam et al. (2023) have proposed that the environment concern can impact the consumer's purchase intention for green products and the supporters of environment-friendly organisations. A high score on one of the environmental concern dimensions might indicate that individuals feel that their consumption choices could impact environmental impacts more broadly. Young consumers are also a part of sustainability discussions, particularly since they receive a lot of information about the environment online and via social networks. Seyfi et al. (2023) have also found that more exposure to sustainability 4.0 problems via digital media will lead to sustainability-based consumer behaviour among Generation Z. The more social media posts that are available of environmental challenges, the more people will become aware and be allowed to do the right thing.

The intention to purchase from a green supplier is directly related to the level of environmental concern. The attitudes towards green products and intention to purchase were found to be positively related to environmental concern by younger consumers (Balaskas et al., 2023). Moreover, Zeng et al. (2023) pointed out that an improvement in environmental knowledge and perception of risk is also associated with an increase in environmental concern that further encourages sustainable consumption. Knowledge about its impact on the environment means that consumers are more likely to engage in the most ethical purchase behaviours.

The connection between caring about the environment and ethical behaviour toward it is also supported by studies of the behaviour of Generation Z consumers. Le et al (2022) found that the high level of concern towards the environment positively correlates with ethical consumer behaviour among the young consumers. They've discovered that environmentally conscious individuals consider environmental issues when evaluating products or brands. Similarly, Lopes et al. (2024) have found that environmental concern was an important mediating factor affecting the decision-making process of consumers in green purchases.

There are some positive determinants of young consumers' ethical consumption. Khan et al. (2023) found that technological impacts, social interaction and environmental consciousness have an impact on green buying intention and green consumption. Accordingly, Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos (2025) argue that the dimensions of the brand associated with sustainability could have a significant impact on purchase decisions by Generation Z. Sometimes young people desire that the brand's sustainability promises match their own values. It's not just about buying eco-friendly products and services; ethical consumption is also about other things. The studies of Venter de Villiers et al. (2024) revealed that knowledge about the environment is involved in their becoming a plant-based consumer. These behaviours include increased concerns about sustainability and conservation of resources from an ethical point of view. Similarly, Sun & Yoon (2022) found that when customers perceive the product quality and corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical consumption consciousness makes them more willing to pay a price premium for environmentally friendly products.

Positive attitudes towards sustainability still exist; however, there are barriers when it comes to ethical consumption. Lu et al. (2022) determined that one of the biggest perceived obstacles to green purchasing intentions was the perception of greenwashing. Sustainability statements often make consumers sceptical and decrease consumer ethics. Sustainability claims and product packaging were also tabled as marketing tools which influence consumers' perceptions; this highlights the need for transparency and credibility towards promoting ethical consumption. Furthermore, Hallez et al. (2023) highlighted the fact that packaging and sustainability labels can impact consumers' perceptions, thereby emphasising the importance of transparency and credibility in promoting ethical consumption. Results from Mehraj et al. (2023) study showed that their environmental concern was not found to have a direct impact on young consumers' green purchasing behaviour, giving room for the researcher to take into consideration the demographic differences when predicting ethical purchasing behaviour. There are a diversity of

factors that can moderate ethical consumption, such as income and level of education, as well as lifestyle preferences. The literature reviewed shows that in general there is a strong correlation between environmental concern and ethical consumption. The concern about greenwashing and the lack of information and affordability are major impediments to responsible purchasing, whereas the awareness of the environment, ethical considerations and the importance of sustainability influence consumers' purchasing decisions.

HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

H1: Environmental concern positively influences ethical consumption decisions among young consumers.
H2: Higher environmental concern increases young consumers' willingness to purchase sustainable and environmentally friendly products.
H3: Environmental concern strengthens ethical consumption through increased environmental awareness and ethical consciousness.
H4: Greenwashing perceptions negatively influence the relationship between environmental concern and ethical consumption behavior.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was a qualitative secondary data analysis. Qualitative research can be employed when the interest is in the meanings, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours related to a phenomenon. Islam & Aldaihani (2022) argue that qualitative methods enable the exploration of social behaviours and complex decision-making processes to a more in-depth level. The study is designed to gain an understanding of the links between environmental concern and the ethical use of products by young consumers; therefore, a qualitative design is an appropriate method for analysing past research and developing a theme. The research is conducted from an interpretivist approach which highlights that individual experiences, values and social influences construct individual consumer behaviour. Secondary qualitative research can enable researchers to combine previous research available from many sources, and results in a very general view of consumers' attitudes and behaviour.

Data Collection Method

The secondary and collected data was the peer-reviewed journal articles; the academic books and scholarly publications related to nature concern, ethical consumption, green purchasing behaviour, and young consumer behaviour. Cheong et al. (2023) raise the need to make use of the existing data sets and literature found online for secondary qualitative research of social phenomena. Collected literature related to the study covered a recent period of time (from 2022 to 2025). The sources used were studies on environmental ethics, sustainable consumption, green purchasing intentions, the behaviour of Generation Z and the perception of greenwashing and marketing with sustainability. Secondary data allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the research topic and to incorporate other geographical, contextual points of view. The data collection procedure was secondary qualitative, following the procedures suggested by Mishra & Alok (2022) and Dubey & Kothari (2022). Relevant studies were identified (and then screened for relevance and collated) under themed areas. The information that was analysed concerned articles referring to environmental concern, ethical consumption behaviour, sustainable purchasing behaviour and attitudes of young consumers.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis method was used in analysing the collected secondary data. A pattern may be identified through text, or a relationship between text, and has been a popular qualitative technique for the detection of these thematic patterns and relationships between text. Thematic analysis is used to systematically analyse qualitative evidence and to contribute to the construction of theories (Islam et al., 2022). The analysis procedure was conducted in several steps. Firstly, repeated reading of the selected literature was done to get familiar with it. Secondly, the key concepts and recurring ideas in relation to environmental concern and ethical consumption were coded (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Thirdly, codes and their meanings were grouped under larger themes. Themes were read to explain the ethical decisions of young consumers regarding eating and food that is associated with environmental concern.

Ethical Considerations

This study is secondary in nature, but overall, ethical research standards have been complied with in the research process. However, it is very significant that the students in qualitative research be forthright, honest and responsible with information (Kang & Hwang,2021). Academic references were used appropriately for all sources used in the study. The study did not plagiarise other people's work and portrayed other people's work accurately. Before arriving at conclusions, the study reviewed or assessed the evidence.

Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability, multiple academic sources of similar concepts, in different contexts, were used. Use of triangulation in interpretation of the findings from different studies gave uniformity and believability. The validity was strengthened by the fact that the publications that were chosen for this study were recent and published by peer-reviewed scientific publications, and were directly related to

the concerns of the environment, ethics of consumption and the behaviour of the youth. Another study result is that there could be bias in the literature that is available. Kelly et al. (2024) point out that there will not be one solution to bias in research evidence. As such, a number of facts from various aspects instead of single specific facts were used to analyse the results.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed 4 major themes to describe why modern people undertake ethical consumption practices with regard to the context of the environment.

Theme 1: Environmental Awareness Encourages Ethical Consumption

Analysis revealed the condition of ethical consumption behaviour to be 'environmental awareness'. Climate Change, pollution and a depletion of resources are issues of environmental concern, which means that young consumers are better motivated to commit to it. Given its ecological concern, it results in sustainable consumption behaviour; Zeng et al. (2023) found this by showing that the more environmentally knowledgeable people are, the higher their environmental concerns are. In the same way, Alam et al. (2023) found that consumers with high environmental awareness are more likely to buy green products. The results reveal that knowing about environmental impacts can influence people's thinking about sustainability when they buy. Young consumers consider consumption to play a part in protecting the environment. Environmentalists turn to actively engage with products that reflect their values and ethics for sustainability.

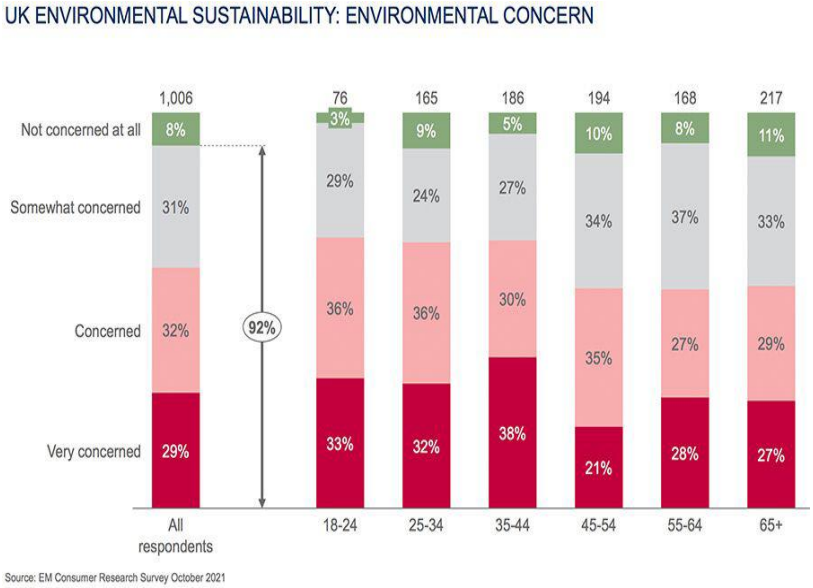


Figure 1: UK consumers embracing more sustainable behaviour
(Source: Consultancy.uk, 2022)

Theme 2: Environmental Concern Strengthens Ethical Purchasing Intentions

An additional theme concerns the direct impact of concern for the environment on buying ethics. Numerous studies have confirmed that consumers' environmental attitudes are statistically significantly related to increasing their intention to purchase environmentally friendly products. Environmental concern influences the intentions of younger consumers to consume green products. According to Balaskas et al. (2023), younger consumers' intentions to consume green products are massively influenced by their environmental concern. In a similar fashion, Le et al. (2022) identified that Environmental concern would aid in understanding Generation Z consumers' Environmental Moral Concern. Literature indicates that young consumers not only assess the functional benefit of products, but also environmental aspects. They consider their footprint and manufacturing, their sustainability certification, and their corporate responsibility. Consumption is thus considered an example of 'personal environmental attitudes' that are manifested in an individual's actions. These results seem to validate H1 and H2, suggesting and confirming that the effects of ethical buying on environmental concern are positive. It can be presumed that these results validate H1 and H2 as they indicate that the relationship between ethical buying and environmental concern is positive.

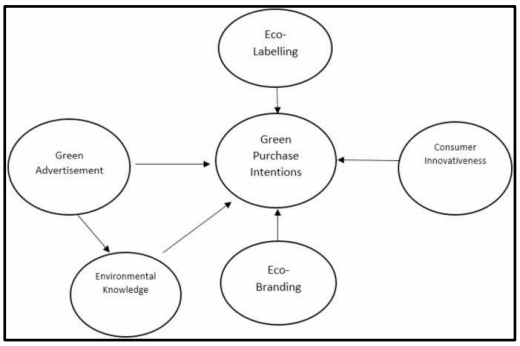


Figure 2: Green advertising positively influences consumers' purchase intentions
(Source: Li, 2025)

Theme 3: Sustainability-Oriented Brands Influence Ethical Consumption

The third theme is on how using sustainable branding and marketing can influence ethical consumer choices. Young consumers, however, make the assumption that the organisation does truly have a business interest in its environmental initiatives. The same was identified by Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos (2025) as they identified that brand dimensions dedicated to Sustainability have an important impact on consumer behaviour in the case of Gen-Z and Lopes et al. (2024) concluded that sustainable branding affects consumers' purchasing decisions as it acts as a central element in their concerns for the environment and is particularly effective when the consumers consume products and services belonging to sustainable brands. Sun & Yoon (2022) also found that the ethical consumption consciousness that exists has a positive effect on the willingness to pay a premium price in the presence of good quality products and CSR programs. The findings indicate that the perceptions of sustainable brands are influenced by the positive feelings towards sustainable brands in relation to environmental concern. Millennials appreciate being part of an environmentally responsible organisation and want to be engaged with the organisation's sustainability program.

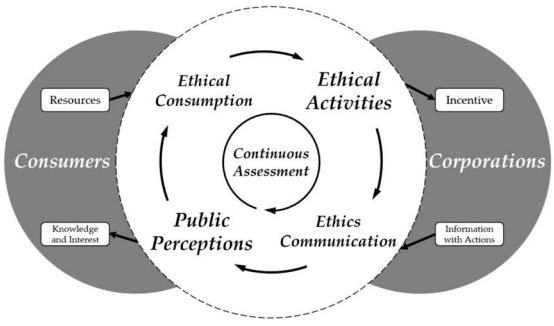


Figure 3: Optimal circulation for ethical market development
(Source: Cheng et al., 2025)

Theme 4: Barriers Limiting Ethical Consumption

Ethical consumption is influenced positively by the expressions of eco-awareness, but there are several hurdles to the use of attitudes in the actual processes of consumption. Greenwashing is among the major problems. Lu et al. (2022) also discovered that perceptions of deceptive environmental claims lead to a decrease in trust and a detrimental impact on green purchase intentions. Sustainability statements with inflated and unfounded assertions are inconclusive for consumers. The price of products is another problem. Green consumers are expressing positive attitudes, but an increase in price may lead an environmentally concerned consumer to not purchase sustainable products. Sun and Yoon (2022) conducted studies on consumers' ideation of product quality and value, revealing that consumers will only pay for a product that offers enough product value and quality.

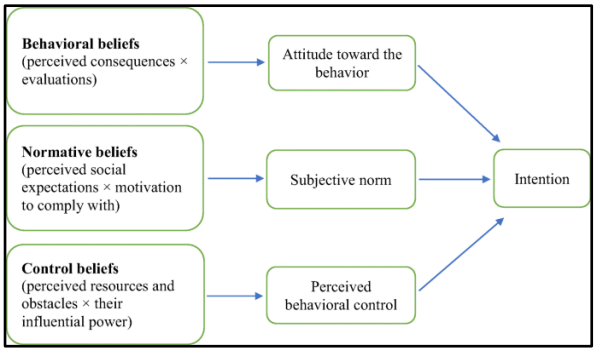


Figure 4: Explaining Ethical Product Choices
(Source: Sun, 2020)

There is a packaging and sustainable communication effect on purchasing. The authors Hallez et al. (2023) concluded that the consumer's perception of the sustainability of the product was influenced by the characteristics and the sustainability statements. Limited communication (or lack of communication) can lower ethical purchase intentions. The findings from demographic differences also show an effect on the likelihood of realising the ethical consumption outcomes. Drawing on a study by Mehraj et al. (2023), green behaviours were found to be measured differently across various audiences of young consumers, suggesting.

Discussion of Results

The results showed that the environmental aspect is one of the important motives of ethical consumption

of youth consumers. In accordance with previous studies, environmentally oriented consumers are more likely to adopt a responsible attitude to their purchases and accept products that are environmentally friendly. Furthermore, the results show that there are several forms and multiple mechanisms of environmental concern. Awareness of the environment increases ethical consciousness and will provide an impetus for implementing eco-friendly purchases. (Alam et al, 2023). Brand sustainability campaigns provide consumers with an opportunity to align their spending choices with their values, adding to the relationship. The lighting up of the green lobby is not necessarily congruent with ethical consumption. Buying habits remain stable, such as reactions to external factors such as price sensitivity, product availability and scepticism regarding green messages.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the issues of environmental concerns on ethical consumption decisions among young consumers by using qualitative secondary sources. The findings reveal environmental concern as one of the influential factors that affect ethical purchasing and sustainable consumption behaviours. Having more awareness of environmental issues makes young consumers more prone to supporting eco-friendly products, sustainable brands and responsible business practices. The nature of consumer environmental awareness, consumer ethical responsibility and consumer sustainability value brand are identified as the key factors in the transformation of ethical consumption, as determined in the thematic analysis above. These encourage consumers to take environmental factors into account and be willing to make choices on sustainable consumption.

This study established a concept of barriers which arise in facilitating ethical consumption with positive attitudes to the environment. Trust and sustainable purchasing intentions are undermined by greenwashing perceptions, the availability of financial budgets and their access to transparency. To maintain consumer trust, therefore, these businesses need to be authentic, credible, and transparent in their sustainability communications. The study further demonstrates that general concern positively impacts ethical consumption, and that is a reason why it should be a foundation for sustainable consumption amongst young consumers. For any company aiming to maintain sustainability and outcompete, comprehending younger generations' environmental values becomes essential as they become more influential in the global markets. As a whole, the study contributes to the ongoing research stream on sustainable consumption by presenting how environmental concerns can impact consumers' ethical buying decisions, and by providing practical applications for consumption marketers, policy makers and sustainability practitioners.

LIMITATIONS

The first limitation is that it was based only on secondary qualitative processing of research data that resulted from previously conducted research. The results presented will therefore be based upon the quality, content and format of the literature that already exists and will not necessarily give a full picture of new consumer trends. Secondly, this study did not have data from young consumers collected in the first person. This resulted in the study not being able to explore the experiences, attitudes and behaviours of individual participants as the study continued. In the future, it may be desirable to acquire more in-depth data on ethical consumption behaviour by means of interviews, focus groups or surveys.

Thirdly, the researcher discovered that comparative results presented in the reviewed studies were international, that is, between different cultures. Social, economic and environmental conditions will vary, which can impact consumer behaviour and therefore limit results to a consumer group at a particular time and location. Finally, being an 'ethical consumer' is a complex process which is culturally supported by their values of respecting the environment, but also by their income, level of education, social norms and their access to or lack of access to certain products. There was a secondary interest in the environmental concerns aspect of the study, but there are potentially other environmental factors that can influence purchases. Finally, there are openings that, with the changing face and consumer awareness of sustainability, the behavioural pattern will likely develop differently. Further research into changes over time in environmental concerns and ethical consumption of younger age groups is warranted.

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