

Title: A new generation of the intention-action gap: Is Gen Z different and how?

Nikhilesh Sinha, Professor of Economics and Finance, Hult International Business School,

Satrupa Ghosh, Professor of Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Hult International Business School

Anna Sophie Herrmann, Hult International Business School.

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This is a developmental paper which seeks to examine the intention-action gap in sustainable and ethical consumption as observed amongst Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012.

The paper aims to make two distinct contributions to the literature. The first is empirical, the second is conceptual.

Introduction

The gap between intention and action in ethical and sustainable consumption is well established in the literature, but there remains a lively debate as to the factors that contribute to its prevalence (Bray et al., 2011; Carrington et al., 2010; Caruana et al., 2016; Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Moraes et al., 2012; Wintschnig, 2021; Young et al., 2010). The term 30:3 syndrome was coined by Cowe and Williamson (2000) to describe the phenomenon of a third of consumers professing to care about the social responsibility records of corporations, though ethical products were found to comprise no more than three percent of market share. A more recent (unattributed) study quoted in the Harvard Business Review suggests that a majority of consumers (65 percent) now say they want to buy purpose-driven sustainable brands but that less than half of those (26 percent) follow through (White et al., 2019). There is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that attitudes of consumers may have shifted in the past two decades towards more ethical and sustainable consumption (Feber et al., 2020; Petro, 2022; Am et al., 2023). This begs the question whether there has been a generational shift towards more ethical and sustainable consumption and a narrowing of the intention-action gap.

Generation Z (aka Gen Z), the demographic cohort following the Millennials, is characterised by its heightened environmental awareness and enhanced understanding of social and ethical issues (Lisboa et al., 2022; Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023). Coming of age amid the widespread introduction of the internet, pandemic lockdowns, and the climate crisis, Gen Z and their values have been shaped by how they grew up (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Gen Zs are also often referred to as digital natives because of their increased amount of access and familiarity with the internet, mobile systems, and social media, which consequently improves their access to market knowledge, including product alternatives, customer reviews and rankings (Lisboa et al., 2022). As a highly educated and diverse generation, Gen Z is more aware of what is happening worldwide and more informed on environmental, social and ethical issues (Lisboa et al., 2022; Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023).

A McKinsey study on Gen Z shows that nine out of ten believe that companies are responsible for tackling environmental and social issues and that "73 percent of Gen Z reported trying to purchase from companies they consider ethical" (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Additionally, as socially conscious advocates, they believe they share the responsibility to mitigate climate change and foster increased equity (ibid). Gen Z also displays a positive outlook on the sharing economy, including apparel rental or collaborative apparel consumption (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023; McCoy et al., 2021).

Does this heightened awareness and concern for environmental and social issues translate into more ethical and sustainable consumption? The short answer appears to be not necessarily (Chaturvedi et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2022; Narayanan, 2022; Williams & Hodges, 2022). Budget constraints may be a significant deterrent for a generation that has barely entered the workforce. Nevertheless, a study of adolescent members of Gen Z and their fashion consumption habits reveals that knowledge of unsustainable production practices associated

with fast fashion may not be recalled while making purchasing decisions (Williams & Hodges, 2022). In other words, awareness and concern about an issue may not affect buying decisions amongst Gen Z. Despite some studies, such as Bock et al. (2021), addressing age differences in the intention action gap, the existing literature leaves out a direct investigation into the specific barriers influencing sustainable consumption behaviours among Gen Z. Given the pro-sustainability attitudes and behaviour, targeted research exploring the unique intention barriers of Gen Z holds importance and practical implications.

Aside from the dearth of studies on this demographic, the phenomenon acquires a particular significance in light of this generation's increased awareness and exposure to ethical and sustainability issues. This research addresses the lack of studies on Gen Z's ethical consumption behaviours and the paradox of their high environmental consciousness not fully translating into action. The findings will provide insights for scholars, marketers, and policymakers to understand and influence Gen Z's consumption patterns towards more sustainable practices. Overall, this research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing both theoretical and empirical insights into the intention-action gap in ethical and sustainable consumption among Gen Z.

The following section lays out the research objectives. We then present a discussion of the prevailing behavioural models applied to examine the intention-action gap and their limitations. The penultimate section explains the methodology of the present study, and the final section presents some thoughts on further development of the paper.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this paper is to explore the intention-action gap in ethical and sustainable consumption, with a focus on the consideration set and purchase behaviour of Gen Z. This demographic is known for its increased awareness and exposure to ethical and sustainability issues, yet there is a noticeable gap between their intentions and actual purchasing behaviours. Therefore, the study aims to investigate how Gen Z's environmental awareness influences their ethical consumption intentions. It will identify factors like knowledge, values, and social norms that contribute to the intention-action gap for this generation. Additionally, the research examines the role of contextual factors like habits and emotions in explaining this gap. Finally, it explores how peer influences and social norms impact the misalignment between intentions and actions among Gen Z consumers.

The secondary objective is to explore the limitations of current behavioural models in conceptualising the intention-action gap, specifically with reference to Gen Z consumers. By critically reviewing and reframing existing behavioural models, the research aims to develop a refined conceptual framework that captures the complex interplay of factors influencing the intention-action gap. This theoretical contribution will enhance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms and processes that contribute to the misalignment between ethical intentions and actual consumption behaviours among Gen Z consumers. The research hopes to extend theoretical discussions on ethical consumption by incorporating newer dimensions such as digital engagement, online social norms, and the role of influencers. It seeks to test the applicability of existing behavioural models (such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the Norm Activation Model, etc.) to Gen Z's ethical consumption behaviours. This contribution is significant for understanding the extent to which existing models can explain the intention-

action gap in a modern context. This includes proposing modifications or extensions to existing models to better account for the unique characteristics of Gen Z.

Research Questions

1. What factors contribute to the intention-action gap in sustainable and ethical consumption for Gen Z (e.g. knowledge, social norms, etc.)?
 - a. What role do contextual factors play in explaining the intention-action gap in sustainable and ethical consumption for Gen Z?
 - b. How do peer influences and social norms affect the intention-action gap in ethical consumption among Gen Z ?
2. What are the limitations of extant behavioural theories in conceptualising and explaining the intention-action gap in Gen Z consumers and how should we adapt or develop new frameworks to better conceptualise decision making mediated by emerging technologies and forms of socialisation?

Theories of Behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and its precursor, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), form the theoretical basis of much of the relevant literature concerning ethical decision-making. The earlier framework introduced the notion that the gap between attitude and behaviour is mediated by an intention to perform the behaviour and that this behavioural intention is a function of subjective norms. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) introduced a new variable – perceived behavioural control – to account for situations where individuals lack complete volitional control over the behaviour. Perceived behavioural control represents the individual's “perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior” (Ajzen, 1991, p188), reflecting the individual's anticipated constraints and past experiences. Ultimately, the two theories conceptualise a rational utility-maximising agent who weighs the costs and benefits before acting (Wintschnig, 2021).

Critiques of the TRA and TPB models include the fact that both subjective norms and attitudes are conceptualised as having independent effects on intention, which suggests an indeterminacy (Bagozzi, 1992). In addition, it is not completely clear how attitudes and intentions are causally related (ibid), which may be one of the roots of the action-intention gap paradox. The cognitive progression is from beliefs to attitudes, attitudes to intentions, and intentions to behaviour. Therefore, it is possible to locate the attitude-intention-behaviour gap between attitude and intention or between intention and behaviour (Carrington et al., 2010). If the route from attitude to intention is unclear, it is challenging to move beyond that. The most prominent critiques of TPB are that it under-theorises normative, affective and habitual dimensions of behaviour and fails to take into account contextual factors (Wintschnig, 2021). Nevertheless, it is by far the most widely applied framework for understanding the action-intention gap.

An alternative framework is the model of Norm Activation (Schwartz, 1977), which posits, in contrast with the individualistic formulation of TPB, that pro-social behaviour may play a role.

Personal norms, conceptualised as feelings of moral obligation rather than intention, may guide sustainable consumption practices. These norms are created by two active personality trait activators: awareness of the consequences of performing or not performing a behaviour and a sense of personal responsibility. This theory, while incorporating norms and responsibility, like TPB, does not explicitly or sufficiently consider emotions and unconscious or habitual actions.

Methodology

Given the inherent challenges in exploring the action-intention gap, a qualitative approach has been adopted to capture individuals' interpretations of their own actions and the meanings they construct. This approach aligns with the work of Johnstone and Tan (2015) and allows for a deeper understanding of the thought processes and decision-making involved in ethical consumption.

Quantitative research, relying on numerical data from surveys, is often used to test specific hypotheses or theories (Saunders et al., 2019). However, it may limit exploring the complex factors influencing ethical decision-making. Participants may provide inaccurate responses or lack the opportunity to provide necessary explanations, potentially leading to misunderstandings and confirmation bias.

In contrast, qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and interviews, utilise non-numerical data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Ragab & Arisha, 2017; Williams, 2007). These methods allow for the exploration and interpretation of participants' perspectives, capturing subjective and socially constructed meanings. This approach enables the development of deeper theoretical insights into the factors influencing the intention-action gap in sustainable consumption.

Plan for Development

This paper is still in the early stages of development, pending a full literature review. This will be completed in the next month, following which we plan to design and implement our data collection strategy. Data collection and analysis is planned for May/June. We hope to be able to present preliminary findings and insights at BAM 2024.

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