

Sustainable Consumer Behaviour in Fashion: Determinants and Implications for Generation Z

Nagashree G. S, Dr. Shobhana Chandra

RV Institute of Management, Bangalore

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150600142>

Received: 27 June 2026; Accepted: 02 July 2026; Published: 17 July 2026

ABSTRACT

As one of the most environmentally intensive industries, fashion shows a persistent gap between Gen Z's pro-environmental values and actual purchasing behaviour, a gap fast fashion's throwaway culture has normalised. This study examines the determinants of sustainable fashion consumption among India's Gen Z consumers, comparing the influence of consumer knowledge, perceived behavioural control, attitude, and external influence on sustainable purchasing.

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted using a structured online questionnaire adapted from Joshi et al. (2023) and Banytè et al. (2022). The seven-section instrument used a five-point Likert scale. Of 208 responses, 187 were retained after cleaning. PLS-SEM in SmartPLS-4 was used for analysis; the measurement model showed AVE above 0.59, composite reliability above 0.83, and SRMR of 0.086.

The structural model explained 67% of the variance in sustainable consumer behaviour ($R^2 = 0.670$, $Q^2 = 0.617$). Perceived behavioural control was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that affordability, availability, and convenience drive sustainable purchasing. Attitude ($\beta = 0.315$) and consumer knowledge ($\beta = 0.262$, both $p < 0.001$) were also significant, with knowledge exerting an indirect effect via attitude ($\beta = 0.104$). External influence had no direct effect on behaviour but operated indirectly through attitude ($\beta = 0.132$), shaping behaviour only through attitudes.

The dominance of perceived behavioural control suggests that reducing structural barriers, such as price premiums and limited availability, is more impactful than attitude-change campaigns alone. The knowledge effect supports investment in standardised, verified eco-labels, while the absent direct external influence effect implies social media promotions are unreliable behaviour-change levers; transparency and certification would serve consumers better. The study ranks four predictors within one model, clarifies the mediated role of external influence, and contributes evidence from an underrepresented Indian Gen Z context.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, sustainable consumption, sustainable consumer behaviour, Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

Few industries carry as heavy an environmental footprint as fashion. Niinimäki et al. (2020) approximate that the industry is a source of about 10 % of the carbon dioxide emissions in the world, 93 billion cubic metres of water, and 92 million tonnes of textile waste into landfills annually. These numbers do not exist in isolation, fast fashion has aggravated them by making trends cycles shorter and making disposable buying habits a normal way of life (Dhir et al., 2021; Turker and Altuntas, 2021). The issue has been exacerbated by the more recent emergence of ultra-fast fashion sites that regularly launch thousands of new designs each week at near-disposable prices.

Against this background, there is no shortage of consumer concern for sustainability. Several surveys indicate that Gen Z, specifically, has high pro-environmental attitudes, and is willing to purchase in a sustainable way (Szabo and Webster, 2021). What is glaringly missing, though, is the translation of those values into buying choices. An important challenge is greenwashing- the act of promoting misconstrued or overstated sustainability

ideas that make it genuinely challenging even to highly inspired consumers to differentiate between genuine products and performative ones (De Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Szabo and Webster, 2021). This information asymmetry issue is particularly acute in fashion, where the supply chains are complicated, the labelling is haphazard, and the third-party verification is uneven (Siano et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2022).

The drivers that could overcome this barrier-environmental knowledge, control over buying decisions and positive attitudes towards sustainability have also been the subject of scholarly research individually. The question that is less established is to what extent they prioritize each other, and the role of External factors, which are often cited as a behaviour change lever, has a significant role to play where general scepticism is high. This study addresses both questions using an empirical sample of Gen Z consumers from India, a setting that has received limited dedicated attention despite India's rapid growth as a fashion market and its demonstrated environmental policy challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The environmental impact of the fashion industry has been widely reported. In a highly referenced article in *Nature Reviews*, Niinimäki et al. (2020) chart the entire lifecycle cost of garment manufacturing, including the extraction of raw materials, dyeing and finishing, and disposal, and concludes that the environmental cost of fast fashion is disproportionately borne in the manufacturing nations but the consumption benefits in developed countries. Turker and Altuntas (2021) add to this analysis with the supply chain lens, demonstrating the structural nature of fast fashion production that relies on small batches at low cost against sustainability. These conditions in the system provide the context within which individual consumer choices are made: a market where the sustainable options exist but are usually peripheral, where they are high-priced and hard to verify.

Greenwashing as a broad term of expression of false or unproven environmental statements has become one of the main barriers to sustainable consumption. De Freitas Netto et al. (2020) refer to a variety of different types, starting with overtly false statements and going all the way to the selective focus and abstract certifications, each of which plays on various gaps in consumer knowledge. The experiment conducted by Szabo and Webster (2021) is one of the most-cited studies in the greenwashing literature on Scopus, and it shows that perceived greenwashing decreases the perceptions of green values, undermines brand attitudes, and inhibits purchase intentions. Their results highlight a dynamic that is vital: it is not the greenwashing that causes the damage in behaviour but the perception of it by the consumer. In the fashion sector, in particular, Lu et al. (2022) demonstrate that the green purchase intentions of young consumers perceiving greenwashing are significantly lower, which immediately suggests that the sustainability communication through branding is more effective. According to Siano et al. (2017), the lack of trust is the issue that can be resolved only with the help of credible third-party verification, as opposed to brand self-reporting, which is a practical implication that was strengthened during the course of the given study.

The reason why knowledge is a recurrent theme in the green consumption literature is that it tempers almost all the other determinants. In the absence of adequate eco-literacy, consumers are unable to assess sustainability claims, comprehend eco-labels, or detect greenwashing. Both general environmental knowledge and eco-label specific knowledge have a positive impact on attitudes towards sustainability and consequently, ecologically mindful purchase behaviour. (Taufique and Polonsky ;2019) . Confente et al. (2020) develop on this by showing that product-specific environmental knowledge enhances consumer confidence to buy bio-plastic. The interesting thing about both studies is that knowledge does not act as a behavioural lever that it works by improving the quality of attitudinal formation and by increasing the attitude-behaviour relationship.

Literatures reveals that attitudinal readiness alone is insufficient. consumers must also perceive that they are structurally able to do something. Nekmahmud and Fekete-Farkas (2020) use the Theory of Planned Behaviour to understand green product buying among Hungarian individuals, and determine that perceived availability and affordability are more effective proximal predictors of intention than attitude in a price sensitive environment. In the clothing setting, Rausch and Kopplin (2021) report a significant intention-behaviour gap and attribute it to the perceived barriers such as product unavailability and price premiums. Kautish et al. (2021) provide another dimension by demonstrating that there is an interaction between values-consciousness and behavioural intention:

consumers who feel that they have control over their purchasing behaviour tend to follow the intentions that are value-consistent. Combined, these results indicate that PBC is not a moderator but rather an independent enabler of sustainable behaviour.

Pro-environmental attitude has been extensively acknowledged as a sufficient but not a necessary one to sustainable purchasing. According to Dangelico et al. (2020), the most prevalent predictor of green purchase intention in their Italian sample is attitude, where the antecedents are environmental concern and personal values. Turker and Altuntas (2021) further contribute that education-influenced and upbringing-informed ethical beliefs result in lasting attitudinal commitment to sustainability. The attitude-behaviour gap is the complication that has been extensively reported in the literature, with even consumers who have high sustainability attitude scores frequently failing to make a purchase that is sustainably oriented when faced with price premiums, limited supply, or uncertainty about the validity of claims (Dhir et al., 2021; Rausch and Kopplin, 2021). This gap is theoretically important because it signals that attitude-change campaigns are likely to be inadequate unless they are supported by structural interventions.

External influence on sustainable consumption encompasses peer norms, family expectations, and increasingly, the ambient normative environment of social media platforms. The authors demonstrate that online groups formed around ethical consumption can promote pro-environmental norms among their members, supporting the purchasing intentions by the means of social identity (Confente et al., 2020). Dhir et al. (2021) affirm that subjective norms- the perceived requirements of significant others is a statistically significant predictor of green apparel purchasing, despite the control of the attitude and PBC. Lu et al. (2022), however, add another critical nuance to it: the perception of greenwashing mediates the impact of social influence, i.e. in high-greenwashing-awareness settings, socially motivated messaging is deprived of much of its momentum. This implies that the external influence factor can be dampened when it comes to digitally-native consumers who take brand sustainability communications as a matter of course.

Hypothesis Development

Consumer Knowledge

Environmental knowledge including general ecological awareness, knowledge of eco-labels, and knowledge of sustainability in supply chains has been repeatedly associated with more considered green purchasing (Taufique and Polonsky, 2019; Confente et al., 2020). Knowledge is a sort of cognitive filter in markets with excessive greenwashing: when consumers possess the ability to perceive certification schemes and discern deceptive assertions, they are less prone to manipulation and can better control the allocation of their spending to genuinely sustainable solutions (Siano et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2022). Taufique and Polonsky (2019) also reveal that eco-label knowledge specifically enhances the attitude-behaviour relationship, whereas Confente et al. (2020) find that knowledge of the environmental features positively influences decision confidence in purchasers of bio-based products. On this basis:

H1: Consumer knowledge positively influences sustainable consumer behaviour and attitude.

Perceived Behavioural Control

Perceived behavioural control - among the three fundamental elements of Ajzen (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour, this element describes how much a person believes that they have the ability to act a particular way. When it comes to sustainable fashion, this mostly translates to the notions of affordability, availability of products and convenience of purchase. Such structural challenges like high prices and limited distribution channels repress the sustainable purchase intention even in the attitude-positive consumer groups (Nekmahmud & Fekete-Farkas ;2020). similarly, ease of access to sustainable clothing is a stronger predictor of actual purchases compared to attitude only (Rausch and Kopplin ;2021). Kautish et al. (2021) build on this image by demonstrating that convenience in terms of time, effort and access to information moderates the translation of intention into behaviour. Together, this evidence suggests that PBC is a structural mediator of individual motivation and market action:

H2: The perceived behavioural control influences sustainable consumer behaviour positively.

Sustainable Consumption Attitude

Attitude towards sustainable consumption shows how a person in general is evaluatively oriented and whether they find buying in a sustainable way to be good, preferable, and in line with their values. The study of attitudes in Italy finds it the most decisive factor in green purchase intention (Dangelico et al. ;2020). According to Turker and Altuntas (2021), the same results were found in the fast fashion supply chain. The rationale is simple: people who consider sustainability as individual identity and moral responsibility tend to find ethical alternatives more often (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Simultaneously, much of the body of research reports the attenuation of the effects of attitudes by practical limitations, indicating the importance of considering PBC and attitude in combination and not as independent predictors. However, the directional attitude anticipation is evident:

H3: Attitude towards sustainable consumption significantly influences sustainable consumer behaviour in a positive way.

External Influence

The two, interconnected channels through which external influence on sustainable consumption acts include normative expectations by peers and the larger social groups, and informational cues conveyed through digital mediums. The article by Confente et al. (2020) reports the process by which online brand communities based on ethical consumption strengthen pro-environmental purchasing norms. The role of subjective norms in the green apparel purchase of retail consumers is measurable (Dhir et al.; 2021). These dynamics have been exacerbated by social media, which has established a fast-feedback space in which sustainable decisions can be made identity (Lu et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the credibility of social media sustainability messaging is increasingly questioned, especially among sceptical Gen Z users who are quite familiar with the concept of influencer-brand collaborations and greenwashing discourses (Szabo and Webster, 2021). This creates actual doubt as to the empirical effect:

H4: External influence has a strong positive impact on sustainable consumer behaviour and attitude.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the determinants of sustainable consumption intention among Gen Z consumers. The data gathered through the use of a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms during March 2026. The questionnaire questions were modified based on Joshi et al. (2023) and Banytè et al. (2022). The questionnaire had seven sections. All questions have been measured on a five-point Likert scale with anchors 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree.

The survey link was shared through university networks, social media platforms, and WhatsApp groups targeting young consumers. Participation was voluntary. 208 responses were obtained, with 187 successfully passing the analysis after data cleaning processes, including the elimination of uncompleted responses and filtering of statistical outliers. All subsequent analyses were done using the final usable sample of 187 responses.

Sample

The final sample comprised 187 respondents with a mean age of 23.72 years, which is consistent with the Gen Z demographic targeted by this study. In terms of gender composition, 104 respondents identified as male

(55.6%) and 82 as female (43.9%), with one respondent not specifying a gender (0.5%).

The demographic profile of the sample is summarised in Table 1 below.

Gender				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent

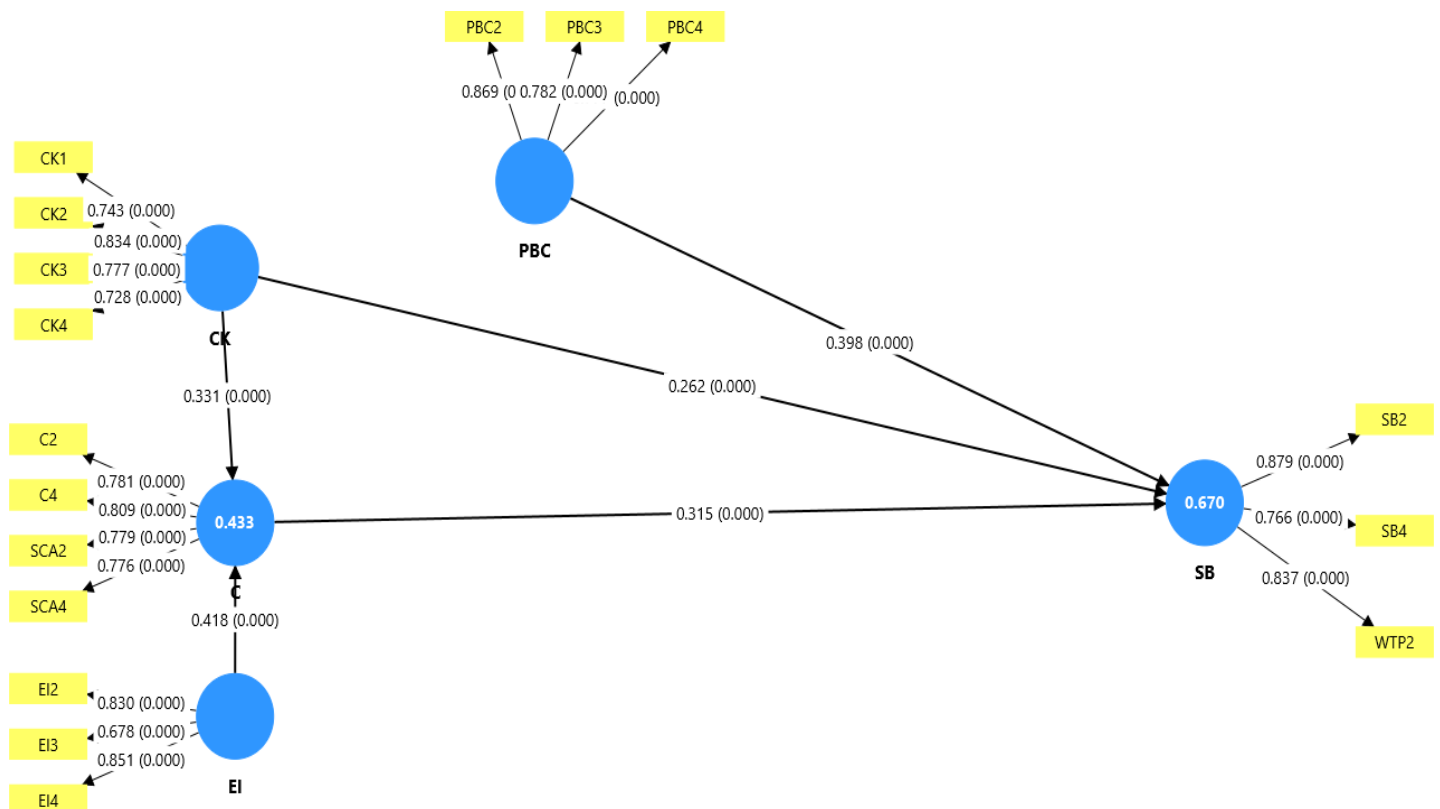
Valid		1	.5	.5	.5
	Female	82	43.9	43.9	44.4
	Male	104	55.6	55.6	100.0
	Total	187	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive Statistics		
	N	Mean
Age	187	23.72
Valid N (listwise)	187	

Measuring Instrument - Questionnaire

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data was analysed using PLS-SEM using SmartPLS-4. The hypothesized model was tested using PLS-SEM algorithm and then bootstrapped to establish the structural paths. PLS-SEM is considered to be appropriate for small nonnormal sample and hence was applied in the present case. (Hair et al., 2019).



C-sustainable consumption attitude, EI-external influence, CK-consumer knowledge, PBC- perceived behaviour control, SB- sustainable behaviour.

Figure 1: Sustainable Behaviour Model.

Measurement Model

The measurement model was found to have the required convergent and divergent validity. The validity and reliability of the measurement model was found to be above the prescribed thresholds. Table -2 shows the value of Cronbach alpha, average variance extracted and composite reliability were found to be in the acceptable limits. The model fit statistics SRMR was found to be 0.086 which is in the acceptable range below 0.1. The Fornell and Larcker criterion was also found to suggest divergent validity of the constructs as shown in table-3 below.

Table 2: Convergent Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
C	0.795	0.800	0.866	0.618
CK	0.775	0.792	0.854	0.595
EI	0.700	0.735	0.831	0.624
PBC	0.739	0.758	0.851	0.657
SB	0.771	0.782	0.868	0.687

Table 3: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	C	CK	EI	PBC	SB
C	0.786				
CK	0.556	0.772			
EI	0.596	0.538	0.790		
PBC	0.494	0.616	0.547	0.810	
SB	0.658	0.682	0.613	0.715	0.829

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model explained 67.0% of the variance in sustainable behaviour ($R^2 = 0.670$). The bootstrapped results are mentioned in table-4.

Table 4: Bootstrapped results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
C -> SB	0.315	0.314	0.057	5.572	0.000
CK -> C	0.331	0.332	0.055	5.984	0.000
CK -> SB	0.262	0.264	0.060	4.342	0.000
EI -> C	0.418	0.423	0.054	7.730	0.000
PBC -> SB	0.398	0.399	0.052	7.679	0.000
Indirect effects	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
CK -> SB	0.104	0.104	0.026	4.030	0.000
EI -> SB	0.132	0.133	0.031	4.285	0.000

H2 was supported: Perceived Behavioural Control emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$). This result echoes Nekmahmud and Fekete-Farkas (2020) and Rausch and Kopplin (2021), and supports the view that structural accessibility-affordable prices, product availability, convenient purchasing pathways is the decisive gateway to sustainable fashion purchasing. Crucially, this finding implies that attitudinal and knowledge-based interventions, however well-designed, are unlikely to produce significant behavioural change without parallel reductions in structural barriers.

H3 was also supported: Sustainable Consumption Attitude demonstrated a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.315$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with Dangelico et al. (2020) and Turker and Altuntas (2021). However, the fact that attitude's effect is weaker than PBC's is itself informative it provides empirical grounding for the attitude-behaviour gap identified by Dhir et al. (2021), and suggests that campaigns aimed at reshaping consumer values must be accompanied by structural change to generate proportionate behavioural returns.

H1 was supported: Consumer Knowledge demonstrated a significant positive effect on both sustainable behaviour and attitude toward sustainable consumption. The direct effect of consumer knowledge on sustainable behaviour was significant ($\beta = 0.262$, $p < 0.001$), and consumer knowledge also significantly predicted attitude ($\beta = 0.331$, $p < 0.001$), with an additional indirect effect on sustainable behaviour operating through attitude (β

= 0.104, $p < 0.001$). This confirms the role of eco-literacy as a behavioural enabler, particularly in environments contaminated by greenwashing (Taufique & Polonsky, 2019; Siano et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2022). Knowledge acts as a cognitive filter that allows consumers to navigate misleading sustainability claims, and it further shapes favourable attitudes that translate into behavioural intention. The comparatively modest direct coefficient relative to PBC is nonetheless consistent with the broader literature: knowing what is sustainable does not guarantee one can afford or access it.

H4 was partially supported: External Influence demonstrated a significant positive effect on sustainable consumption attitude ($\beta = 0.418$, $p < 0.001$), and exerted a significant indirect effect on sustainable behaviour operating through attitude ($\beta = 0.132$, $p < 0.001$). However, no direct path from external influence to sustainable behaviour was established, indicating that the influence of external factors on behaviour is mediated by attitude. This diverges somewhat from studies reporting direct subjective norm effects on behaviour (Dhir et al., 2021; Confente et al., 2020), though it aligns with the theoretical expectation from TPB that normative and contextual pressures shape behaviour primarily by modifying attitudinal dispositions. One plausible explanation is that our Gen Z sample digitally native, greenwashing-aware, and inclined toward individual rather than social determination may simply be less responsive to peer and social media influence in sustainability domains than older cohorts. This finding reinforces Lu et al.'s (2022) observation that greenwashing perception moderates the effectiveness of socially mediated sustainability messages, and warrants further investigation through moderation analyses involving greenwashing scepticism or social media literacy.

The results were further corroborated using the PLS predict function of Smart PLS, the values are mentioned in table-6. Q-square greater than zero suggests the model has high predictability (Hair et al., 2019)

Predictors	Outcome	R Square (R^2)	F square (f^2)	Q Square (Q^2)
PBC	SB	0.67	0.197	0.617
CK			0.112	
C			0.219	
EI	C	.433	.219	.415
CK			.138	

CONCLUSION

Summary

This paper has investigated the factors influencing sustainable fashion consumption among Indian Gen Z consumers. The perceived behavioural control, sustainable consumption attitude, and consumer knowledge had a significant positive impact on sustainable behaviour. Consumer knowledge also had a positive influential impact on sustainable consumption attitude. External influence proved to have a significant impact on attitude, a mediating effect on sustainable behaviour through attitude but no direct impact on behaviour was found. The model accounted 67% of the variance in sustainable behaviour which validated the theoretical model that was based on the TPB proposed by Ajzen (1991) and added knowledge and external influence constructs.

Theoretical Contributions

There are three contributions that can be distinguished. First, the study offers a clearer view of the relative importance of its four predictors compared to other past studies that tested each variable separately since the study gives the 4 predictors in a single model. Second, the observation that the effects of external influence are indirectly mediated by attitude and not directly as a behavioural effect sheds some light in a literature that tends to assume the effects of social media as a direct behavioural manipulator. Third, the study adds empirical data to the Indian setting, which has been a poorly represented area in the literature on sustainable fashion, which has been largely European or East Asian in its sample.

Practical Implications

The dominance of PBC is a noteworthy cue to retailers and brands. Reducing the price premium on sustainable fashion through subsidies, economy of scale or loyalty program on sustainable fashion would be more effective than attitude-change campaigns. For certification bodies and regulators, the knowledge finding underscores the value of standardised, independently verified eco-labels that consumers can trust without specialist knowledge. The mediated effect of external influence acting via attitude rather than directly on behaviour-read alongside the results of Szabo and Webster (2021) on perceived greenwashing suggest that brand-led social media campaigns will hardly lead to a direct change in behaviour without the initial success in changing the attitude of consumers. Transparency and third party credibility are thus better long term assets than influencer reach.

Limitations and Future Research.

There are a few limitations that should be noted. The convenience sample restricts external validity to educated Gen Z consumers; the cross-sectional study design inhibits causal inferences; and self-reported behaviour risks the social desirability factor. Further research ought to take into account longitudinal designs, objective purchase tracking, and sample across various income brackets and geographic locations. The mediated contribution of the external influence, especially, should be further explored: a moderation analysis including the concept of greenwashing scepticism as a moderator between external influence and attitude and then behaviour is likely to unravel the circumstances under which social media and peer influence are converted into sustainable purchasing.

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