

Review Article

# Digital Habits Shape Sustainable Online Shopping Decisions among Gen Z

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**Abstract** - This study examines the role of digital in shaping consumer behaviour among Gen Z for sustainable purchases. Semi-structured interviews use 18 informants in collecting data through qualitative methodology following by thematic analysis. The findings highlight three key themes: Digital Behaviour of Perceptions and Motivations of Gen Z, Online Shopping Habits and Decision-Making Factors, including Views on Sustainability and Sustainable Shopping. Informants reveal that most of them lack knowledge of digital behaviour, will purchase the products based on customer reviews and put efforts to save the planet. Nonetheless, price comparison becomes the greatest obstacle in educating people on how to practice sustainable online shopping. Generally, this research focuses on the significant contribution of social media in producing Gen Z that assemble sustainable habits in their daily life.

**Keywords** - Digital habits, Sustainable shopping, Online shopping, Online shopping, Gen Z shopping behavior.

## 1. Introduction

It has been 50 years since the use of the Apollo Guidance Computer (AGC), and now, a device far more powerful than the AGC, which several billion people around the world own. Such devices are known as smartphones, which have much higher computing power and offer a greater variety of functions than the computers used by NASA. In fact, today's modern washing machines also contain more computing power than computers in the past, making life easier for users. In general, smartphones are the gateway to many opportunities in digital business, better known as online business. Most smartphone users, especially Generation Z, are not aware of how their phones work or how they access the Internet and the applications they use. (Chaffey, Edmundson-Bird & Hemphill, 2019). Therefore, this study examines the role of Generation Z's consumers on the grounds of their growing number and their growing influence in the global market (Tunsakul, 2020). Generation Z consumers (Gen Z) are now a group that attracts attention for retailers worldwide due to their growing number and their growing influence in the global market. Based on previous studies, Gen Z consumers tend to be less loyal to certain brands and find it difficult to attract and retain their attention. Those born in 1995 or later live in the digital age and are usually highly innovative, tech-savvy and educated. The study also found that Gen Z users are attracted to new technology, keen on simple things, seek a sense of security, have a desire to escape from reality, have high expectations, and pay close attention to the experiences they get (Tunsakul, 2020).

### 1.1. Purpose of the Study

This study examines the connection between digital influence on the world of the internet and sustainable consumer behaviours. Digital tools and social media that target Generation Z are examples of digital influence (Ghouse, Shekhar & Chaudhary, 2024)

## 2. Literature Review

Developing a digital business is not an easy task. It is full of challenges, including making the right strategic decisions and surviving the increasingly fierce competition. Not all businesses make it through this journey. However, one thing is certain, whether it is a new business or an existing business, those who succeed are those who are good at leveraging digital technology, online marketing, and supply chain management to make the right decisions (Chaffey, Edmundson-Bird & Hemphill, 2019).

The same goes to Generation Z. Studies indicate that Gen Zs are profoundly influenced by online platforms, social media, and peer recommendations (Munsch, 2021). For instance, in every brand they engage with, Gen Z prioritizes genuineness, transparency, and social responsibility (Schwarz, 2024). Additionally, this generation tends to have shorter attention spans and a preference for visual and interactive content (Diz, 2021). Therefore, to benefit the exclusive characteristics of Generation Z, businesses must adjust their communication strategies to successfully connect and engage with them (Munsch, 2021).



Recently, the sustainable online shopping market has experienced significant growth as consumers become more concerned about the environmental impact of their purchases. This shift towards sustainability in the online sector is driven by an increasing demand for organic, locally sourced, and environmentally friendly products (Choi, Chung & Young, 2019). Besides, this trend is particularly popular among Gen Z consumers, especially those who prioritize sustainability and ethical practices in their shopping decisions (Munsch, 2021). To have better communication with Gen Z customers, shopping retailers are changing their master plans by including digitalization methods so they can meet this demand. This includes the use of mobile apps and online platforms to provide detailed product information, traceability data, real-time-in-mall navigation and sustainability certifications. By offering transparent and easily accessible information, retailers aim to empower consumers to make informed choices and align with their sustainability objectives (Ng et al., 2021).

In order to target sustainable online shoppers and consumer decision-making, corporate communication strategy must carefully consider which platform is the right one to use when interacting with Generation Z. This is because Gen Z is defined as those who were born between 1996 and 2012 (Ng et al., 2021), are accustomed to using a wide range of online platforms for communication and information gathering since they grew up in a highly digitalized environment (Munsch, 2021). Generally, social media sites such as TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram are particularly a hit among Generation Z (Swanson, 2022). These platforms accommodate Gen Z's demand for rapid and engaging material by providing graphic content, short movies and interactive elements. Furthermore, Gen Z is widely known as a group that appreciates honesty and authenticity (Lim, 2024) in relationships, which makes YouTube and podcasts excellent venues for spreading genuine and educational content (Renisyifa, Sunarti & Pebriyanti, 2022). Nonetheless, it is crucial to make sure that the platforms selected are in line with the goals of the communication strategy's objectives and the target audience's preferences and behaviours. Effectively, understanding Generation Z also requires being aware of the specifics of each medium and designing content appropriately.

The digital era has a high impact on today's young generation. This is because technology and personal and social life seem to have merged and become the needs of almost everyone, including Generation Z (Van Lierop, 2023). The development of technology forms new patterns and relationships between humans and themselves, making the presence of the digital era bring positive and negative impacts (Volti & Croissant, 2024). Besides, the world is currently in the era of Industrial Revolution 4.0. According to Malik et al (2021), some characteristic of the 4.0 industrial revolution is the Internet of Things, which is the speed controlled by the Internet. Nowadays, almost all jobs are connected to an internet connection, including a small search that is usually

easy to think of. However, due to the internet's ability to get answers faster, digitization is used. That being said, one of the abilities that Gen Z must have in facing the era of the digital revolution is the ability of Digital Literacy. Digital literacy skills play a very important role in everyday life, especially when making a purchase. The research carried out by Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014) states that "the ability to search for information on the internet is considered one of the important skills that students must have because it plays an important role in determining the success of their studies. Therefore, students with good digital literacy skills will be able to find and select important information and understand, communicate, and deliver ideas in the digital space. In line with the research done by Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014), some other research mentions that Digital literacy skills will open opportunities for students to think, communicate, and create, which ultimately leads to student learning success. Therefore, awareness of the urgency of digital literacy skills needs to be increased among decision makers so that they will eventually choose a better option while purchasing, especially sustainable products.

### 3. Methodology

In this research, the study applied a qualitative method, which means obtaining detailed and in-depth information in one area and place involving individuals in the area (Moriarty, 2011). This research design can further strengthen the research findings. In-depth interviews will be conducted with Gen Z in Terengganu to get an in-depth perspective on digital habits shape sustainable online shopping decisions among Gen Z. Interviews can be conducted individually or in small groups to get a more detailed perspective (Gaskell, 2000). Snowball sampling will be used to select informants representing Generation Z and different habits of online shopping. Generation Z in Terengganu, which has been involved in digital habits, will be selected as informants.

Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with Gen Zs involved in online purchases. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed to obtain relevant information (Ranney et al., 2015). Qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Daama et al., 2023). The thematic analysis involves steps such as transcription, coding, theme identification and organizing themes systematically (Christou, 2022). The results of this analysis using NVivo 15 software will provide a deep understanding of Generation Z's habits that then shape sustainable online shopping decisions.

Referring to this study, the researcher used the community population among youth aged 12 to 28 years old, who are the dividing line between adults and children, as the subject of the study. As for the selection of the place, the researcher did not set a specific place because the focus is to carry out the manifestation of how digital habits shape

sustainable online shopping decisions among Gen Z. However, since the focus is on Generation Z, the researcher has chosen universities as places to conduct research and obtain information sources. Furthermore, some informants among adults were also selected to obtain information about the occurrence of digital habits in terms of online shopping. Thus, the researcher chose the population of those groups to research the social changes of the society, which are influenced by the diversity of elements and external influences.

**4. Results**

Based on the objective, this section will analyze all the study results that have been obtained. This section has identified the perceptions and motivations of Gen Z students regarding sustainable online shopping influenced by digital communication efforts. Along with digital behaviour, online shopping habits, and decision-making factors, views on sustainability and sustainable shopping factors were also analyzed. All informants were asked a few questions in relation to the objective: (1) Can you tell us a little bit about your background? (2) Can you explain a little bit about your understanding in terms of digital behaviour? (3) How often do you make online purchases? (4) What factors weigh in when making a purchasing decision online? (5) Do any of the following factors affect your purchasing decision: ethics of the company, place of production, use of materials like plastic, packaging, and company values? (6) Is sustainability a factor you consider when making online purchases? (7) What is sustainability for you? What do you understand by that? (8) What is a sustainable lifestyle for you? (9) Is sustainability important to you? And if yes, why? (10) How much does social media affect your purchasing decisions online? (11) What made the influencer convincing? (12) How often do you encounter advertising of any kind on social media?

Referring to the results of in-depth interviews with all informants, various perceptions and motivations obtained by the informants were presented. The following are the statements given by the informants regarding this issue:

At first, to make it less awkward and try to have a casual talk so they are not stuck in a formal situation, the researcher let the participants introduce themselves and asked a little bit of what they are grinding on. Then, the researcher slowly continued to ask about the study to a deeper level. Drawing on the results of this research, the participants were asked about their understanding of digital behaviour. Apparently, only 10 out of 18 participants know what digital behaviour is, and they mostly refer to the terms as the way a person uses a digital platform. According to P1, it is about behaviour from media use where she states that *“Digital behaviour...Maksudnya...err daripada... tingkah laku daripada penggunaan err menggunakan medsos? Mungkin”*. Similarly, P2, P5, P6, P8, P9, P12 and P13 also mention it as the way a person acts or makes decisions online. Some of the

answers given were: *“digital behaviour as activity and identity in the digital world”* from P11, *“how digital technology will affect each focal behavior in the context of e-commerce or how each uses technological facilities to help selection patterns or changes in the decisions made”* from P10. Other than that, it is because they have comprehension issues on this matter and a lack of understanding.

Table 1 below displays the keywords for each informant’s answers related to the digital behaviour of perceptions and motivations of Gen Z students regarding sustainable online shopping influenced by digital communication efforts.

**Table 1. Digital behaviour**

Code	Frequency
Media use	4 occurrences
Devices	3 occurrences
Applications	3 occurrences
Unaware of Digital Behaviour	5 occurrences

When the question was asked about online shopping habits and decision-making factors, all informants stated their preferences differently in terms of product reviews, convenience, pricing, and many more. P7 for example, speaks on the need and her wants at the moment, *“Kekerapan eh? emm bergantung kepada barang keperluan dan kehendak saya waktu itu”*. P1 also talks about the quality concern which recorded as *“Faktor utama... emm saya sangat mementingkan kualiti. Selain dari melihat tanda harga yang murah, saya lebih suka pilih barang yang tahan lama untuk jangka masa panjang. Walaupun harga dia mahal sekalipun tapi barangan itulah lebih worth it dari barang yang kualiti rendah”*. Other informants share the opposite habits, such as P11, who loves to shop online and basically online shopping every day. Nonetheless, most informants have made online purchases to fulfil their needs.

Table 2 below displays the keywords for each informant’s answers related to online shopping habits and decision-making factors.

**Table 2. Online Shopping Habit and Decision-Making Factors**

Code	Frequency
Customers review	10 occurrences
Necessity	5 occurrences
Price Comparison	8 occurrences
Quality	5 occurrences

Regarding views on sustainability and sustainable shopping, all informants’ responses were particularly varied in terms of sustainability and the value of eco-friendly products. To be precise, there are a few that responded positively, while on the other hand, their answers were not up to expectations. On sustainability terms, only 14 over 18 informants provided the right response. P7 says *“Pemahaman*

saya ya, saya faham sustainable ni lebih kepada menfokuskan produk yang eco-friendly iaitu produk yang tak bagi harm dekat alam sekitar”. As such, it explains that sustainability focuses on eco-friendly products that do not harm the environment. P10 also shares that this term actually defines stabilization and lasts longer. It was documented like this, “Pada saya, barangan mampan ni sangat diperlukan dan menjadi salah satu faktor utama pemilihan. Kalau ada dua barangan yang serupa dan harga yang berpatutan, saya akan utamakan yang tahan lama, tahan lasak dan mesra alam”. Just as researcher pointed before, they are quite numbers of satisfying feedback such as from P8 where it clarifies the relevant meaning of what sustainable means in this study which, “Sustainable ni macam konsep yang fokus pada menjaga keseimbangan di mana kita boleh guna sumber yang ada sekarang tanpa menjejaskan keupayaan generasi akan datang untuk guna sumber yang sama”.

Table 3 below displays the keywords for each informant’s answers related to views on sustainability and sustainable shopping.

**Table 3. Views on Sustainability and Sustainable Shopping**

Code	Frequency
Customers review	10 occurrences
Necessity	5 occurrences
Price Comparison	8 occurrences
Quality	5 occurrences

#### 4. Discussion

This section will answer the research question related to Gen Z’s perceptions and motivations, which was formulated as “How to explore the perceptions and motivations of Gen Z students regarding sustainable online shopping influenced by digital communication efforts?”. The results of the study allowed the researcher to obtain a definite answer. First and foremost, from the outcomes of in-depth interviews with 18 informants, only 13 participants give positive responses regarding digital behaviour. According to informants, four of them answered about media use, three regulating devices, and another three about applications. Meanwhile, 5 informants stated that they were unaware or had a lack of knowledge on the matter. In relation to the clarifications above, the majority of Gen Zs mentioned that media use indicates what digital behaviour is (Kim et al., 2016).

Next, when the question asked about online shopping habits and decision-making factors, all informants stated differently. In this matter, participants contemplated buying anything that was caused by their budgets, necessity, quality, reviews, price comparison, and many other issues. Relating to these aspects, out of 18 informants, 10 strictly mentioned that they would refer to customers’ reviews and feedback on the items they would buy. It is to ensure that none of them will get scammed or receive the products not according to what they

have ordered (Blumberg, 2023). 5 participants stated that shopping habits would occur when there is necessity to purchase things, and 8 responded on price comparison since online platforms sometimes have “glitched vouchers” or, even better. These random accounts sell products at lower prices than others. In terms of quality, 5 participants conducted a thorough evaluation of the items so that it met their expectations and would be less disappointed as the products arrived.

Besides, in regard to the question of views on sustainability and sustainable shopping, all informants’ replies were varied. This is due to their interpretations with each sustainable product that eventually developed new perspectives and awareness (Ramos et al., 2020). To be precise, many participants shared their thoughts on how sustainability would benefit their lives.

This can be seen in terms of earth preservation. 12 out of 18 participants insist on building a better environment for future generations. That being said, many have tried to consider buying sustainable products. It is important to start practising sustainability (Thiele, 2024), as 13 informants say. Similarly, the practices itself need much effort in conjunction with keeping the planet “green” (Thiele, 2024). Likewise, the majority of informants, 16 out of 18, share their endeavours, which can have positive impacts on the environment.

For example, countless have attempted not to add plastics or reduce plastics to their purchase in lessen the negative effects on the environment, use eco-friendly shopping bags, choose brands that are concerned about nurturing the planet such as comedogenic products, Hygr or even better, all out practising the 3R (reduce, reuse and recycle) in daily life.

However, there are still a few participants who detached from this attempt because they do not really care about sustainability or are in denial of what to do and contribute to sustainability. Four informants are recorded considering the pursuit of practising sustainability. Even so, it is important to educate the people around us to take better care of the earth (Raihan, 2020). Acknowledging the initial steps toward practising this has actually already been discussed by informants in advance, where they state that although they do not purchase sustainable items, they practice buying long lasting products, which indicates sustainable materials.

#### 5. Conclusion

Finally, in today’s digitally advanced world, Generation Z cannot ignore the importance of AI (Artificial Intelligence) and social networks within society (Natale, 2021). This also applies to companies and their communication strategies, which have had to change to keep up with the changes in advertising, communication, and technology (Blakeman, 2023).

Specifically, the network's changes have caused businesses to move from having a basic website to creating their brand on social media and utilizing the new digital tool more engagingly and directly with customers (Quesenberry, 2020). However, this is no longer sufficient in today's world, as customers now view with suspicion any approach that appears to be commercial, even if it is informal (Panigyraki & Polyportis, 2024). Digital technology also has a positive impact if used in business (Dana et al., 2022). This matter needs to be highlighted by entrepreneurs who need to use technology to increase results, reduce operating costs, and increase customer and employee satisfaction (Torre, Tommasetti & Maione, 2021), thereby emphasizing sustainability in their business. Additionally, the use of social media enables many business activities, such as delivery, promotion and marketing (Dektariova, 2024). That being

said, it is important to directly convey information about sustainability to users so that they can see this matter differently and positively (Sheng, Zhang & Zhou, 2023). Therefore, future studies can investigate the effect of digital on consumer based on their perspectives related to products they have bought or services they have tried. In another words, there is the risk of digitalization in online purchases.

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