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Sustainable Purchasing Behaviors in Generation Z: The Role of Social Identity and Behavioral Intentions in the Saudi Context

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Abstract: This study investigates the sustainable purchasing behaviors of Generation Z in Saudi Arabia, providing an insightful exploration by integrating the theory of planned behavior and social identity approach. Through qualitative research, the study uncovers nuanced insights into the motivational factors and social dynamics influencing eco-friendly consumer choices among young adults. It highlights the importance of environmental consciousness, peer influence, and identity-based motivations in shaping sustainable purchasing patterns. The findings reveal that Generation Z's decisions are significantly influenced by a combination of personal attitudes, perceived social norms, and identity-related aspirations towards sustainability. This research broadens the current understanding of green consumption in a culturally specific context, suggesting that young consumers' sustainable behaviors are deeply intertwined with their social identities and environmental awareness. The implications of these findings are significant for policymakers, marketers, and manufacturers aiming to encourage eco-friendly practices among younger generations, highlighting the need for tailored strategies that resonate with their values and social identities.

Keywords: sustainable purchasing behavior; Generation Z; theory of planned behavior; social identity approach; consumer behavior; Saudi Arabia; eco-friendly practices; young consumers



Citation: Elgammal, I.; Ghanem, M.; Al-Modaf, O. Sustainable Purchasing Behaviors in Generation Z: The Role of Social Identity and Behavioral Intentions in the Saudi Context.

Sustainability **2024**, *16*, 4478.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su16114478>

Received: 10 February 2024

Revised: 30 April 2024

Accepted: 15 May 2024

Published: 24 May 2024

Correction Statement: This article has been republished with a minor change. The change does not affect the scientific content of the article and further details are available within the backmatter of the website version of this article.



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1. Introduction

Increasing concerns about environmental issues have led to a growing interest in sustainable purchasing behavior, which refers to the act of purchasing products or services that have a minimal negative impact on the environment, social justice, and economic sustainability [1–3]. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of sustainable purchasing behavior, there is a lack of understanding of the factors that influence such behavior [4–6], particularly among younger generations [7–9]. Young adults are often burdened by the presence of an endangered environment and a host of harmful societal issues. As a result, they tend to possess a heightened awareness of the problems related to environmental protection and societal well-being [10]. However, to effectively play an active role in addressing these issues, young generations need to be effectively engaged in aspects of sustainable development [11]. Such active participation is crucial for young adults to contribute positively to environmental sustainability and social progress.

Interestingly, prior studies on sustainable behavior have differed in their results regarding the actual interest and engagement of young generations in sustainable purchasing behavior. For instance, Park and Lin [8] found that young adults consume fewer ethical products and that many perceive fashion products from the price–quality continuum. Others [7,12] reported that Generation Z individuals exhibit a higher degree of inclination towards the integration of sustainable practices into their daily pursuits. Moreover,

researchers [5,13–15] have noted a discrepancy between young adults' expressed desire for sustainable practices and their actual behavior, and further referred to it as the green intention–behavior gap [8,16]. Therefore, it is considered essential to investigate the factors that influence the behavior of young consumers in purchasing sustainable products, to explain the causes of the intention–behavior gap, and to find effective solutions. This aims to stimulate strategies and support policies that promote sustainable purchasing behavior.

Much of the empirical research on eco and sustainable behavior is drawn from Western countries, with limited studies from developing countries [4,17]. However, studies in the Western context have reported the need to investigate the antecedent attitudes and values of sustainable purchasing and understand consumers' actual behavior regarding purchasing sustainably [18,19]. Accordingly, there is a need for research in Eastern and developing countries to identify differences and determine how to promote actual sustainable purchasing behavior in different contexts, as it is essential for the future of our planet.

Based on this debate, the current study aims to examine the factors that influence sustainable purchasing behavior among young consumers, specifically Generation Z members. For the empirical investigation, Saudi Arabia has been chosen as an example of an emerging economy in the eastern region. As the largest economy in the Middle East and the 19th largest economy globally [20], Saudi Arabia provides an interesting case study to explore. With rapid economic and population growth, the adoption of sustainable practices in the country [21] is expected to have far-reaching effects on the sustainable development of the region. The Islamic religion plays a significant role in shaping the values and practices of Saudi people [22]. The impact of religion and education is evident in people's attitudes and decision-making [23–25]. To improve its competitiveness and future development, Saudi Arabia has recently shifted its focus towards developing sustainable strategies and promoting practices that meet international standards for protecting its natural resources [26]. However, there is a lack of information regarding the actual sustainable behavior of people, as well as the factors that drive or hinder such behavior. Therefore, research is needed to explore the integration and promotion of sustainable policies and the degree to which they are entrenched in the culture.

This study employs the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and social identity approach (SIA) as a framework for interpreting its results within a broader theoretical context. These theories have been recognized as valuable tools for examining the factors that influence consumer behavior [6,8,9,27,28]. However, there is a lack of studies that have integrated these theories into a single framework to examine the factors that influence sustainable purchasing behavior among Generation Z. The following section delves into how these theories are incorporated and utilized to develop more nuanced explanations and insights.

In the pursuit of understanding the green purchasing behaviors of Generation Z in Saudi Arabia, this study deliberately adopts a qualitative research approach. The intricate social dynamics and cultural nuances that influence sustainable purchasing decisions among the youth in Saudi Arabia necessitate a deeper, exploratory methodological framework. Qualitative methods allow for an enriched understanding of the motivational factors, identity-based influences, and broader social context that shape environmental consciousness and green purchasing patterns. This study has several contributions to theory and practice. Firstly, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence sustainable purchasing behavior among Generation Z in Saudi Arabia by integrating the TPB and SIA into a single framework. Secondly, the identification of effective promotional strategies can guide policymakers and marketers in promoting sustainable behavior among Generation Z. Finally, this study contributes to the broader goal of promoting sustainable development by providing insights into sustainable purchasing behavior among the country's emerging consumer segment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Sustainable Purchasing Behavior

The sustainable behavior of consumers has gained attention worldwide as it has implications for the environment, society, and economy [1,29]. Sustainable consumption and sustainable purchasing are two related but distinct concepts that are often used in research related to sustainable behavior. While sustainable consumption refers to the overall consumption patterns and practices that individuals engage in, sustainable purchasing specifically refers to the act of buying products or services that are produced, distributed, and disposed of in an environmentally and socially responsible manner [16,28]. Sustainable consumption is thus a broader concept that encompasses all aspects of individual consumption practices, including purchasing behavior [30]. It is worth noting that while the concepts of sustainable consumption and sustainable purchasing are distinct, they are often related. For example, purchasing sustainable products may be one way that individuals try to reduce their overall environmental impact and engage in more sustainable consumption practices. Similarly, engaging in more sustainable consumption practices (e.g., using public transportation instead of driving) may influence individuals' purchasing behavior by leading them to seek out more sustainable products and services [6].

This study recognizes the difference between purchasing and consumption, with the former being the act of buying eco-friendly products and the latter involving the overall use of these products. However, the main aim is to examine what drives Generation Z in Saudi Arabia to buy green products. Highlighting this difference emphasizes the complexity of sustainable actions, showing that buying decisions are connected to wider consumption habits that have important environmental impacts.

Factors influencing sustainable purchasing behavior include personal values and beliefs, perceived consumer effectiveness, product availability and information, price, and social norms [6,9,16,31–33], as well as trust in green products and the perceived benefits of sustainable products [13,34]. This is in addition to past behaviors and experience [33,35]. For instance, consumers who place a high value on environmental and social responsibility are more likely to engage in sustainable purchasing behavior [25,28]. Similarly, perceived consumer effectiveness, or the belief that individual actions can make a difference, is positively associated with sustainable purchasing behavior [6,8,34,36]. Recent studies have shown that sustainable purchasing behavior is also influenced by external factors such as culture and religion [24,25].

In contrast, factors influencing sustainable consumption are more diverse and complex and may include a range of personal, social, and environmental factors. These can include individual values, attitudes and beliefs, education and awareness [37–39], risk perception [39], social norms, and policy interventions [34,38,40]. For instance, research has found that individuals who place a high value on environmental protection and sustainability are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption behaviors, such as recycling and reducing energy consumption [34]. Social norms and social influence are also important factors in sustainable consumption, as individuals are often influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of their peers and social networks [6,8,10].

It is important to note that the factors influencing sustainable purchasing behavior and sustainable consumption are not mutually exclusive and may overlap to some extent. For instance, personal values and beliefs are likely to influence both types of behaviors, as are social norms and the availability of information. In general, promoting sustainable development requires addressing both sustainable purchasing behavior and sustainable consumption, and understanding the range of factors that influence these behaviors. To understand the antecedents of sustainable purchasing behavior among Generation Z, this study integrates the TPB and SIA to explore the factors that shape their intentions and actual behavior.

2.2. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Researchers have employed the TPB [41], which is considered the most used theoretic framework to examine antecedents of sustainable behaviors [8,28]. The TPB is an extension of the earlier theory of reasoned action (TRA) proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein in 1980 [42]. The TPB includes the same components as the TRA (attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral intentions) and adds perceived behavioral control as a predictor of behavior. According to Ajzen [41], attitudes refer to an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing a particular behavior. Subjective norms refer to an individual's perception of social pressure to perform or not perform a particular behavior. The social pressure can come from significant others, such as family members, friends, or coworkers, and can include both normative beliefs (beliefs about what others think one should do) and motivation to comply (the extent to which an individual is motivated to comply with the beliefs of others). Perceived behavioral control refers to an individual's perception of their ability to perform a behavior, and it is hypothesized to directly influence behavior [43].

The TPB provides a parsimonious model that suggests that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control predict intentions, which in turn predict behavior [30–32,37,41]. For instance, a study conducted by Liobikienė et al. [28] found that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control were significant predictors of green purchasing behavior in the European Union. However, the limitations of employing the TPB to comprehend antecedents of sustainable behaviors have been underscored by various researchers who argued that the prediction power of TPB is insufficient [30–32,37,44], since it is believed to exclude important factors [45], such as habits and past behaviors [33,46] and emotional variables [47].

2.3. Social Identity Approach (SIA)

Given the limitations of the TPB, other theoretical frameworks such as the SIA have been proposed to investigate sustainable behaviors. The SIA is a theoretical framework within social psychology that seeks to explain how individuals define themselves in terms of group membership and how their identification with those groups affects their attitudes, behaviors, and relationships with others [48]. The SIA emphasizes that social identity is not only a matter of individual psychology but also a product of social norms and expectations, historical and cultural contexts, and power relations between groups [49]. It also recognizes that individuals can have multiple and intersecting identities, which can interact in complex ways to shape their attitudes and behaviors [40,50,51].

Perceiving oneself as part of a pro-environmental group is considered a significant factor in promoting pro-environmental behaviors [52]. Additionally, identifying with a “typical recycler” is a predictor of recycling intention, independent of other factors such as attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [40,53]. Therefore, the SIA has the advantage of outlining how identifying with a particular group can either promote or hinder efforts to address sustainable behavioral issues [27,35,51].

A study by Fielding et al. [52] found that social identity and the TPB were significant predictors of sustainable agricultural behavior. The authors found that the interaction between an individual's self-identity and the social norms of their group predicted their intention to engage in sustainable agricultural behavior. Similarly, Joshi and Rahman [13] found that attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and green self-identity were significant predictors of green purchasing behavior in India. In addition, Groening et al. [16] reviewed a variety of applied consumer-level theories, including the TPB and SIA, in the context of green marketing.

The results of prior studies suggest that sustainable purchasing behavior is influenced by a complex array of factors, including attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, personal norms, and social identity [1,8,18,37–39]. This, in addition to other factors such as environmental knowledge, perceived effectiveness, values, availability, trust, information, and price, can also play a role in sustainable purchasing behavior [29,34,38,40].

Accordingly, we believe that these frameworks can be used to better understand consumers' motivations and decision-making processes related to sustainable purchasing behavior.

2.4. Research Methods

This study applies a qualitative investigation to comprehensively understand the perspectives and attitudes of young consumers towards sustainable purchasing. A non-probability approach (i.e., purposive sampling) was used to select study respondents [54]. Criteria included being a young consumer, aged 19–28 years, with at least one recent purchase within the past three months, preferably comprising sustainable or green materials.

Semi-structured interviews, serving as a fundamental tool within grounded theory, offer researchers the opportunity to explore perspectives and attitudes, thereby revealing current contexts [55,56]. From July 2022 until January 2023, persistent efforts were made to engage young consumers in this study. Of the 74 individuals initially approached, only 18 consented to participate and accepted the interview proposal. Potential respondents were identified in settings such as universities, where they were invited to volunteer for the study interviews. Each interview session lasted roughly 30–45 min. The data collection continued until saturation was achieved, i.e., when no additional themes could be discerned from the data, occurring after the 18th interview [57,58].

2.4.1. Procedures and Pilot Study

Given that the respondents' native language was Arabic, a language distinct from that of this article, dual versions of semi-structured interview questions were employed for data collection [58]. The original prompts, formulated in English, were translated into Arabic by the researchers and a bilingual associate. To ensure the validity of the translation, another bilingual colleague, for whom Arabic is the primary language, performed a back-translation into English. Subsequent comparison of the two English versions confirmed the absence of any culture-specific linguistic elements.

Each interview commenced with a concise overview of the study's objectives, along with introductions to key concepts such as religiosity and attitudes towards sustainable purchasing. Respondents were given the liberty to choose their preferred language for the interview, with 88% opting for Arabic, and 12% preferring a blend of Arabic and English.

The second phase involved a pre-test of the prompts with five university students to affirm their comprehensibility and validity. Consequently, to enhance language clarity, four questions were modified based on the feedback from the pre-test. The final list of prompts is identified in Table 1. Quotations from the interviews are presented in the Discussion section, accompanied by information about the respondents, such as the initial of their first name, sex (male or female), and age (for example, Interview 3, O/F, 20Y). Table 2 displays the profiles of the study respondents.

Table 1. Interview prompts.

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|----|--|
| 1. | How do you define sustainable purchasing, and how does it differ from your understanding of sustainable development? |
| 2. | How did you first learn about sustainable purchasing behavior? |
| 3. | What drives you to purchase sustainable products, such as eco-friendly food and clothing? Can you elaborate on your motivations? |
| 4. | Can you share examples of how you specifically engage in sustainable purchasing? What actions or choices do you make that reflect your commitment to sustainable purchasing? |
| 5. | What obstacles do you encounter when trying to make sustainable purchases, and how do you address them? |
| 6. | How has social media influenced your decisions regarding sustainable purchases? Can you describe any positive or negative impacts? |
| 7. | In what ways do your religious and cultural beliefs encourage you to engage in sustainable purchasing behaviors? |
| 8. | What personal or external factors motivate you to maintain sustainable purchasing habits? |

Table 2. The study respondents' profiles.

Respondents	City	First Initials	Male/Female	Education	Age
1	Jeddah	R	F	Master	25
2	Jeddah	B	F	Bachelor	24
3	Riyadh	O	F	Bachelor	20
4	Madinah	L	F	Bachelor	19
5	Riyadh	Sh	F	Bachelor	20
6	Riyadh	A	M	Bachelor	25
7	Riyadh	S	F	Bachelor	19
8	Tabouk	R	F	Bachelor	19
9	Jeddah	E	F	PhD	28
10	Jeddah	Ab	M	Bachelor	26
11	Jeddah	H	M	Bachelor	27
12	Riyadh	F	M	Master	27
13	Jeddah	J	F	Bachelor	22
14	Jeddah	B	M	Bachelor	24
15	Jeddah	F	F	Bachelor	21
16	Jeddah	N	F	Bachelor	22
17	Jeddah	R	M	Bachelor	28
18	Riyadh	A	M	Bachelor	24

2.4.2. Data Interpretation: A Thematic Analysis Approach

Employing the methodological approach advocated by Braun and Clarke [59], thematic analysis was used to interpret the gathered empirical data. The initial coding was based on a list of general themes extracted from a thorough review of the relevant literature [60]. This list was open-ended, allowing for the emergence of patterns during data interpretation and subsequent evolution and refinement. To limit potential biases, each researcher analyzed the data independently. The codes and themes proposed by each researcher were then compared, discussed, and honed. This iterative process involved multiple cycles of data analysis and regular cross-checking of themes and codes, thereby ensuring the validity and precision of the interpretations:

- **Initial Thematic Framework:** Prior to data collection, an initial set of themes was developed based on a comprehensive literature review. This deductive step provided a preliminary structure for coding the data, focusing on areas such as attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, in line with the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and social identity approach (SIA).
- **Inductive Thematic Analysis:** Following data collection, we undertook an inductive analysis, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. This involved carefully transcribing interviews, coding data iteratively, and identifying patterns and themes that reflected the participants' perspectives on sustainable purchasing behaviors.
- **Iterative Refinement:** The initial themes served as a guide, but we remained open to new themes emerging from the data. Through an iterative process of coding and analysis, themes were refined, merged, or divided based on their relevance and depth in the data. This process ensured that our final thematic framework accurately represented the data while still being informed by our initial deductive framework.
- **Translating Themes to the TPB/SIA Framework:** After establishing the final set of themes, we mapped these back to the TPB and SIA frameworks to understand how each theme aligned with or extended these theoretical perspectives. This helped

clarify the role of social identity, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control in shaping sustainable purchasing behaviors among Generation Z in Saudi Arabia.

As per the data presented in Table 2, the sample comprised 11 female and 7 male respondents, all within the age range of 19 to 28 years. The majority, accounting for 88%, held at least a bachelor's degree. Moreover, the respondents hailed from various prominent cities in Saudi Arabia, including Jeddah, Tabouk, Medina, and the capital city, Riyadh.

3. Results and Discussion

This study investigates the factors that influence the sustainable purchasing behavior among Gen Z in Saudi Arabia by integrating the TPB and SIA. The suggested framework highlights the interplay between the TPB and SIA in shaping sustainable purchasing behavior among Gen Z. Specifically, the TPB provides a framework for understanding how personal attitudes, social norms, and behavioral control influence sustainable purchasing behavior, while the SIA adds a layer by highlighting the role of social identity in shaping those attitudes and norms. Integrating these theories, we propose that sustainable purchasing behavior among Generation Z is not only a result of personal environmental attitudes and perceived control over actions (as posited by the TPB) but is also significantly influenced by their identification with social groups that prioritize sustainability. This dual framework provides a better understanding of the motivational forces behind Generation Z's sustainable purchasing choices, encompassing both individual cognitive processes and the impact of social dynamics. The current study's findings reveal interesting insights into various factors that are found to be related to actual sustainable purchasing behavior. The quotations chosen in each section are ones we believe are suitable for the theme discussed, however, some of the quotations may be found to fit more than one theme, as discussed in the following subsections.

3.1. TPB: Perceived Influences on Attitudes toward Sustainable Purchases

Consumers' purchasing decisions are mainly based on their attitudes and intentions [61]. Thus, a positive attitude towards sustainable purchases would result in sustainable behavior [62,63]. Generally, the study respondents showed a positive attitude towards sustainability and referred to some purchasing and consumption behaviors that followed as a result of their positive sustainable attitudes. One of the factors that affect Gen Z's attitudes towards sustainable purchasing behavior is social media, which helps with forming individuals' understanding of crucial sustainability issues and may further influence the sustainable consumption patterns of the community. In line with prior studies, the attitudes towards purchasing green and sustainable items of young consumers are influenced by the information they learn about these products via social media, online reviews, and other sources [29,64]. According to the study respondents, social media can have either a positive or a negative influence on individuals' attitudes towards sustainable purchasing behavior. For instance, one of the respondents asserted, "Social media platforms provide us with much information on preserving the environment, such as the disadvantages of using plastics, air pollution, and the ozone layer, which further form our attitudes towards purchasing sustainable products" (Interview 14, B/M, 24Y).

Most respondents indicated that the most popular places to find information about sustainability and motivational posts for eco-friendly alternatives are on Twitter: "There is information out there on beauty and apparel, but not much information about the sustainable purchasing of food" (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y).

Gen Z's attitude towards sustainable purchases could be negatively influenced if they have some economic constraints such as limited income, which can make it challenging to purchase the often highly priced sustainable products. Indeed, the availability of cheaper alternatives could hinder Gen Z's willingness to purchase sustainable products. Therefore, providing financial incentives to businesses and young entrepreneurs is recommended. This could include, for instance, tax credits or discounts for sustainable products to encourage sustainable production in companies, which in turn should reflect decreasing prices and

increasing availability. Business concepts operating on a sustainable base also can provide discounts and loyalty program incentives for Gen Z, which could positively change their attitudes towards sustainable purchases.

3.2. TPB: Subjective Norms

Respondents indicated that within their communities, there is some social pressure from their family, friends, and other reference groups to purchase certain luxury products on specific occasions to show that they are from a highly recognized family. Such goods are not necessarily sustainable or environmentally friendly. This confirms the influence of subjective norms on the sustainable purchasing behavior of Saudi Gen Z, as noted by prior researchers on the TPB (i.e., [37,41]). One of the respondents indicated, “When asked why these expensive purchases are the theme of Saudi Arabian festivals and parties, where an abundance of items can be seen, customs and traditions are the answer” (Interview 11, H/M, 27Y) and, “Everyone in my society is spending more money on costly brands than they can afford, which is immoral because it could result in a person’s perspective narrowing to their benefit only when purchasing” (Interview 9, E/F, 28Y). In addition, the Saudi community believes that excessive food should be available at events and occasions to show generosity to their guests, as referred to by a respondent in the following quotation: “When it comes to food, we find that there are still norms that encourage people to consume more than they need, particularly when they have guests” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y) and, “Families here are purchasing food supplies in large quantities in addition to going to restaurants frequently, which is considered unethical consumption” (Interview 15, F/F, 21Y).

However, as indicated by another respondent, some Saudi families have environmental awareness and are trying to spread the word among their members to reinforce sustainable consumption through “family initiatives”: “Every year, my family meets for two weeks to discuss how much water we consume in plastic bottles. We also set aside locations to collect bottle caps, which we then give to special needs institutions” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y).

Thus, it is part of the inherited culture and traditions of Saudi families to purchase luxury products and buy more food than needed. In that context, scholars such as Sun et al. [65] suggest that because luxury goods are more likely to last, buying them can be a special way to practice sustainable consumption. However, Gen Z may possess another perspective on sustainable purchasing awareness than their families, as shown in the following quotation: “My mother makes highly expensive purchases, but I am financially responsible and have good money management skills. I can also identify my requirements, goals, and desires, which include looking for appropriate eco-friendly products when possible” (Interview 13, J/F, 22Y). Such positive Gen Z behavior could be encouraged by increasing the sustainable purchase behavior activity of influential figures such as celebrities and bloggers, emphasizing the benefits of sustainable practices and creating peer networks to support and encourage sustainable purchasing behavior. This could gradually change the inherited culture of multiple luxury purchases and gear the peer pressure and social norms towards more sustainable purchasing behaviors.

3.3. TPB: Perceived Behavioral Control Influence on Sustainable Purchasing Behavior

Respondents indicated that sometimes they lack the resources and opportunities to engage in sustainable purchasing behaviors. For instance, one of the respondents referred to the unavailability of eco-friendly products: “Although I have an interest in sustainability, sometimes environmentally friendly products are unavailable” (Interview 1, R/F, 25Y). Another referred to their high prices, which do not match the purchasing power of Gen Z: “A very significant obstacle is the per capita income, which is crucial and directly affects our lifestyle” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y) and, “I wish there were market offerings of alternative sustainable products with lower prices” (Interview 9, E/F, 28Y).

Also, the late delivery does not match the speedy life Gen Z is used to: “Environmentally friendly products, such as foods and electronics, are either unavailable or expensive, or have a delay in delivery, which forces me to opt for other products” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y).

Factors such as the availability and accessibility of sustainable products need to be considered by businesses and marketers to encourage sustainable purchasing behavior. One of the respondents suggested that sustainable products should not be expensive: “I believe if businesses implemented incentives to restore their products after use, such as reusing supermarket bags, eco-friendly products would be less expensive, but unfortunately, there is no governmental or societal pressure on businesses to do that” (Interview 6, A/M, 25Y). Prior research has shown that within the fashion industry, younger generations consume fewer sustainable and ethical products even though they are the most conscious about sustainability. They view fashion as a continuum of price and quality and have not yet accepted ethical and sustainable clothing as a practical substitute for fast-fashion items that are inexpensive [8,66]. Also, respondents referred to the lack of actual enterprises that encourage sustainable purchasing behavior: “I’m not aware of any stores where I can buy eco-friendly products except at KAUST, where I bought a medal. Almost all of the sustainable products that iHerb sells are cosmetics only” (Interview 7, S/F, 19Y). According to Elgammal et al. [67], several young Saudi entrepreneurs started their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and adopted sustainable and green practices for their business model in the restaurant industry, but perhaps they failed to spread the word among Gen Z through their marketing strategies.

Furthermore, young females are aware of the sustainability and ethical issues related to purchasing cosmetics more than other products. This may be due to the promotion of the business itself (i.e., iHerb), where they flag products as sustainable and environmentally friendly. Another respondent added, “Laws and regulations, promoting environmental awareness, word-of-mouth marketing, and social media usage are all crucial. People become tired and bored of receiving so much advice and direction, so it is preferable to provide alerts and reminders via entertaining videos” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y). Governments can enact laws that encourage sustainable production and consumption. Examples of these laws include those that establish product sustainability standards or provide financial rewards to companies that use sustainable practices. Furthermore, collaboration between corporations, governments, and civil society organizations is recommended to promote sustainable purchasing behavior, enhance the supply of sustainable products, and make them more affordable and accessible.

3.4. SIA: Community’s Role in Supporting Sustainability Purchases

The study respondents referred to their identification with a social group that values sustainability and environmentally responsible behaviors, such as WhatsApp groups, as indicated in the following quotation: “Being a student in KAUST provided me the opportunity to join its WhatsApp group that raises sustainability awareness and promotes sustainability practices for interested members” (Interview 6, A/M, 25Y). Such groups help them foster a sustainable culture by promoting sustainable practices and values among the group members. While groups can be formed in universities and schools where knowledge is transformed and circulated, individuals can also identify themselves with workplaces, community events, and conferences about sustainable purchasing behavior [40,51].

Furthermore, respondents indicated that there is currently much interest in sustainability in supermarkets, restaurants, food packaging, and drinks: “Some supermarkets provide biodegradable bags to carry purchases, which is something I consider when I make my purchases to have a positive sustainability influence” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y). This can include using WhatsApp to form groups of individuals who are interested in saving the environment: “There is a KAUST group on WhatsApp about 200 sustainability-interested people where some sustainability-related projects are promoted” (Interview 4, L/F, 19Y). However, there are still relatively few people in these communities, with mostly young individuals and teenagers but not elderly people: “Unlike us, the elderly have less interest

in sustainability issues, but we wish the whole community would become interested in saving the environment while making a purchasing decision" (Interview 4, L/F, 19Y). Indeed, respondents believe that the entire society needs to get engaged in sustainability, especially while making purchases.

3.5. SIA: Religion and Culture

In the Saudi societal landscape, the interplay between Islamic beliefs and cultural traditions significantly influences behaviors toward sustainability. Central to this are the Islamic tenets of "amanah" (trustworthiness) and a strong stance against wastefulness, as encapsulated in the saying, "The spendthrifts are brothers of the devils." These concepts underline the critical role of environmental stewardship and responsible consumption as enshrined within Islam [22], as confirmed by the following quotation: "Muslims are always required to have a continuous improvement throughout life, whether in word or deed, because one of the reasons for God's creation of human beings is the reconstruction of the earth and not its destruction and destruction, which I feel I do it through my sustainable purchases" (Interview 6, A/M, 25Y). The adherence to Islamic principles fosters a sense of duty towards the conservation of natural resources and advocates for mindful consumption practices. Islam also urges believers to conserve and sustain not only resources but also individuals' lives, as indicated by the following quotation D s: "I think we as Muslims are encouraged by our religion to follow the sustainability principles and this are not only required for preserving our available resources, but also it is required for individual lives to sustain the good human beings on earth" (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y) and, "We must know that God is watching us and since I believe that I'm part of the surrounding environment, I have a very high motivation to preserve it. I also take care of individuals in the society as much as I can as require by Islam" (Interview 9, E/F, 28Y).

Contrasting with these sustainable ideals, however, are certain cultural practices associated with the display of generosity during festive periods, which can lead to extravagant consumption patterns. A respondent insightfully remarked, "Generosity is a beautiful thing, but sometimes it has reached a stage of very large unjustified extravagance in special events without preserving the grace in the Kingdom, which is an issue we need to consider" (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y). This observation underscores the tension between cultural expressions of hospitality and the necessity for sustainable consumption, echoing findings from recent studies on the influence of culture and religion on purchasing behaviors [24,25,68]. Another respondent indicated that Islam urges Muslims to be fair in their consumption to differentiate themselves from devils: "The wasters are the brothers of the devils, if we observe all the concepts of global sustainability, and some of them may be from the Western world, they are basically assets found in our Islamic religion, this is a complete and comprehensive link that sustainability stems from our Islamic religion" (Interview 4, L/F, 19Y). Nevertheless, some cultural habits are not following that rule: "It is the basis of Islam not to consume excessively, and not to waste, and that we have learned since we were young, it is not permissible to be extravagant and wasteful, these are things that are self-evident in our Islam, however, I still notice a negative habit of my community where they purchase unnecessary amounts, particularly in food as a sign of generosity" (Interview 1, R/F, 25Y).

Islamic environmental ethics, which advocate for Wasatiyyah (moderation) and the prohibition of Israf (waste), provide a foundational perspective for fostering sustainable purchasing among Muslim consumers. These ethical principles highlight the individual's responsibility to safeguard the environment and to utilize resources wisely, aligning with sustainable consumption objectives. Saudi Arabia's cultural norms around generosity, while potentially leading to overconsumption, also present avenues for cultivating sustainable habits. By integrating the principle of Wasatiyyah to balance generous acts with sustainability, there is potential to reshape consumption patterns towards more responsible practices, particularly during social and festive occasions.

To leverage these insights, policymakers and educational institutions are encouraged to develop initiatives that embody Islamic values and Saudi cultural norms. By positioning environmental sustainability within the context of religious obligations and cultural identity, these campaigns can become more appealing and effective for Generation Z, encouraging a shift towards sustainable purchasing behaviors.

3.6. Sustainability Knowledge and Awareness

Respondents indicated that the adoption of sustainable purchasing behavior may be hampered by low awareness of critical environmental issues and their impact on society: “There is a general lack of awareness of global environmental issues such as climate change” (Interview 7, S/F, 19Y). Furthermore, respondents stated that such a lack of knowledge makes it difficult for Gen Z to behave sustainably within a community that does not value their behavior: “The community’s lack of sustainability understanding and awareness is our biggest challenge for behaving sustainably” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y) and, “One of the challenges is that I am attempting to be committed to preserving the environment in the absence of an integrated society to do so” (Interview 1, R/F, 25Y). Prior studies within the context of Saudi Arabia confirmed that high levels of green and sustainable awareness would influence the community’s sustainable purchasing behavior [3].

On the other hand, another respondent indicated that the Saudi community already has some sustainability knowledge that needs to be increased while making sustainable products more available: “Our society has some knowledge of the importance of purchasing sustainably but not that much, and eco-friendly products are not always available” (Interview 11, H/M, 27Y).

Education and awareness campaigns are used to educate consumers on the environmental, social, and economic consequences of their purchasing decisions, as well as to supply them with information on sustainable alternatives. This can include marketing and advertising for sustainable and eco-friendly products [1]. For example, organizations can use eco-labels to inform consumers about the sustainability of their products or use marketing campaigns that highlight the environmental and social benefits of their products. In addition, Gen Z can spread the word about sustainability within their families and communities to raise awareness, as referred to in the following quotation: “I explain to my parents and those around me not to use a certain type of cups because they are made of less environmentally friendly materials which hurts us” (Interview 1, R/F, 25Y). This emphasizes that Gen Z’s green word of mouth could have a positive impact on the Saudi community and help in gearing attention towards more sustainable purchasing behavior.

Another respondent referred to the role of social media celebrities in raising awareness about sustainability issues: “Many online celebrities are raising sustainability awareness on social media, particularly about the excessive single-use plastic cans” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y).

3.7. SIA: The Saudi Community Habits and Prior Experience

Respondents indicated that Saudi communities have some unsustainable habits related to purchasing food and food containers: “As we may know, families here are purchasing much food particularly when they have guests” (Interview 11, H/M, 27Y) and, “my family always purchases many plastic cups, forks, spoons, and food containers” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y). Furthermore, habits related to purchasing plastic spoons and cups, which are cheap and readily available, have lessened the options for making sustainable purchases of such products, as indicated in the following: “My society does not give me options, for example, plastic spoons are cheap and everywhere, so I have to use them” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y) and, “Habits are established here, making it tough to replace social general attitudes and a lack of environmental awareness. I feel that if it improves, which will take some time” (Interview 4, L/F, 19Y). Respondents also indicated that changing community habits could start with raising awareness among teenagers and young children so the next generation would have a better sustainability attitude and better purchasing behavior. This can be planned with the help of social media platforms, social media influencers, and gamified

learning [63] to spread the word about sustainable purchasing behavior and its positive influence on the community and the environment: “Young children and teenagers can be influenced and made more conscious of sustainability through social media, but not through more conventional media like television” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y). This is in line with recent studies such as Zafar et al. [63], who indicated that people’s habits of consumption must be altered to achieve sustainability. They could, for example, buy sustainable products, which would reduce the environmental impact of their consumption and encourage a sustainable way of living.

3.8. SIA: Perceived Consumer Effectiveness

The study respondents believe that their actions as consumers can make a difference in promoting sustainability: “I just feel that my purchase choices for sustainable products would have a positive influence on the environment and society, however, I feel skeptical of sustainable retailers and product information” (Interview 8, R/F, 19Y). Sustainable skepticism addresses people’s mistrust of business communications related to environmental efforts to promote eco-friendly products (Chan and Orazi, 2020 [69]). Trust in product information could lessen the consumers’ feelings of being effective and may influence their sustainable purchasing behavior [70]. Another respondent indicated, “It is critical that sustainable factories and retailers actually use sustainable materials and help the needy rather than just making up slogans” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y) and, “I watched a YouTube video about large companies that claim their products are biodegradable and environmentally friendly, but unfortunately, they don’t tell the truth about how they are made or used” (Interview 12, F/M, 27Y).

Companies’ false claims about their sustainable products are considered a critical deception for communities and may force customers to opt for the more convenient purchasing choices when they are skeptical of the product information: “There is no point for me purchasing a sustainable product if I have doubts about the accuracy of its information; I will only be concerned with getting the one that is less expensive” (Interview 6, A/M, 25Y). On the other hand, another respondent referred to one of the reasons for businesses to disseminate false sustainability information, which is their lack of acceptance of the sustainability concept and its implementation principles, as indicated in the following quotation: “The main barrier is that companies feel that sustainability threatens their ability to turn a profit quickly because they have to work hard to find alternatives unless they are under tremendous pressure from the end user, who is influenced probably by social media and has a strong desire to buy sustainable products for the environment” (Interview 11, H/M, 27Y). Green skepticism is an issue that was found to have a moderating effect between consumers’ environmental concern and their green purchasing behavior, particularly within the Saudi context [3]. However, the precise reasons behind consumers’ low acceptance of green products persist despite growing environmental awareness and concern [4]. Hence, if businesses develop environmental programs for consumers, it may increase their environmental concerns, reduce their green skepticism, and lead to proper knowledge and awareness.

3.9. Gen Z’s Sustainable Purchasing Behavior

Prior studies have referred to the importance of engaging consumers in sustainability issues so they can adopt a more sustainable lifestyle [11,29]. Behaving according to sustainability principles starts with having a base knowledge of environmental issues [71]. The study respondents indicated that Saudi society has some knowledge about sustainability issues, but when it comes to sustainable and green purchases, eco-friendly products are not always available, and hence continuous sustainable purchases are mostly challenging. Nevertheless, Saudi Gen Z within the current study context is currently purchasing environmentally friendly products as a result of their religious, human, and self-improvement motivations. Their current multiple sustainable purchasing practices are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of sustainable purchasing activities and behaviors among Generation Z.

Themes	Example of Quotations
Reuse	Having a sustainable purchasing behavior does not always imply wasting a lot of money; there are simple alternatives, such as: “Instead of buying plastic cups regularly, I use my washable glass cup.” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y) “I go to the grocery store more often with cloth bags than plastic ones.” (Interview 7, S/F, 19Y) “I occasionally buy goods from a used, secondhand store, especially toys.” (Interview 8, R/F, 19Y)
Repurposing	“I save and sterilize the plastic bags I get from mall purchases to make them into something unique that I can use whenever I want.” (Interview 9, E/F, 28Y) “I turned glass chocolate containers into rose holders. I use plastic from empty water can lids to create paintings; in college, we used the lids to create a painting of a tree and its branches.” (Interview 2, B/F, 24Y)
Avoid	“I don’t purchase any apparel made of animal skin because I believe those species may be in danger of going extinct.” (Interview 4, L/F, 19Y) “I try not to buy non-sustainable goods; I look for information about the production and recycling processes of the food, clothing, and footwear I buy.” (Interview 11, H/M, 27Y) “Since money is a blessing; I never purchase supplies or goods that I don’t need just because they’re on sale.” (Interview 17, R/M, 28Y)
Purchase Sustainably	“I’m buying only makeup that has not been subjected to animal testing.” (Interview 16, N/F, 22Y) “I make an effort to support sustainability by buying recyclable goods.” (Interview 15, F/F, 21Y) “When making a purchase, I take the product’s need, quality, and price value into account.” (Interview 14, B/M, 24Y)
Recycle	“I shop at a specific supermarket in Saudi Arabia because they use recyclable plastic bags.” (Interview 11, H/M, 27Y)
Purchase Responsibly	“I try to support sustainable businesses and manufacturers that donate a portion of their profits to the environment, the underprivileged, and those in need rather than purchasing something that might harm others.” (Interview 12, F/M, 27Y). “I don’t purchase fur because it involves the mistreatment and killing of animals. Also, I consider the item’s price in relation to its quality because there is a concept known as financial sustainability.” (Interview 5, Sh/F, 20Y). “I always purchase energy-saving appliances, such as household bulbs.” (Interview 18, A/M, 24Y)
Supporting Local and Sustainable Entrepreneurs	“I purchase from a Saudi entrepreneur who sells environmentally friendly and biodegradable packaged goods.” (Interview 10, Ab/M, 26Y) “When I want to buy an imported product, I always look for a local substitute, especially from business owners who support sustainability.” (Interview 8, R/F, 19Y) “I support local products through purchasing from productive families and farm markets.” (Interview 13, J/F, 22Y)
Reducing Excessive Purchasing	“Although I love accessories and spend a lot of money on them, I have recently cut back on my purchases since learning about the concept of sustainability.” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y) “I try to buy enough food for my family while making sure that we eat it all at the right time and before it expires. This is an example of my moral consumption.” (Interview 18, A/M, 24Y)

According to Table 2, the study respondents listed several activities they perform as part of their lifestyle that demonstrate their sustainable purchasing behavior. Such activities include reusing goods, such as using washable glass cups instead of plastic ones; purchasing cloth bags for multiple shopping trips; and visiting secondhand stores to buy used items. Repurposing is another activity where goods can be used for multiple purposes. Respondents also indicated that they avoid purchasing non-sustainable goods, apparel made of animal skin, or discounted unneeded supplies. In addition, they highlighted the extent to which they purchase sustainably, particularly cosmetics that have not been subjected to animal testing; buy recyclable products; and consider the product’s need, quality, and price value. Purchasing from sustainable businesses and entrepreneurs is another activity that shows Gen Z’s sustainable purchasing behavior, which benefits the local community and contributes to social sustainability [72].

On the other hand, the massive promotion on social media of cheap goods negatively influences the attitudes of Gen Z towards sustainable purchases indirectly, as shown in the following quotation: “There are plenty of promotions on social media platforms which always attract us to purchase and try. None of these goods have information about the environment or sustainability, but we still buy them for their good deals” (Interview 1, R/F, 25Y) and, “Nowadays, luxury goods are heavily advertised rather

than necessities, which affects consumer preference and impulsive purchasing, particularly on social media where users are constantly checking for sales” (Interview 3, O/F, 20Y). Social media celebrities could influence their Gen Z followers to purchase extensive goods they promote [73], which are often expensive but are not considered related to sustainable purchases or to show any environmental concern.

Young adults purchase fewer ethical products, as reported by Park and Lin [8], and many of them perceive fashion items as falling somewhere along the price–quality continuum. However, within the study context, respondents indicated that they considered the price, quality, and product information before making their purchase decisions, which refers to their strong and positive beliefs in sustainability. This also confirms the effective influence of environmental consciousness and eco-labeling on sustainable purchasing [1]. Further, respondents refer to their decrease in unneeded excessive purchasing since they aim to reduce their impact on the environment and ensure ethical and moral consumption [6].

4. Theoretical Contribution

The present study contributes theoretically by integrating the TPB and SIA to elucidate Generation Z’s sustainable purchasing behavior. Unlike prior research that employed these theories in isolation, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the antecedents leading to actual behavior in Gen Z. It delves into the complex interplay of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, social identity, and the influences of religion, culture, sustainability knowledge, and perceived consumer effectiveness within the specific context of the study. The findings suggest that attitudes towards sustainability, while crucial, are insufficient in isolation and require reinforcement through SIA elements. Additionally, the study offers an in-depth examination of unique factors influencing Gen Z’s sustainable purchasing behavior in Saudi Arabia, including the roles of family initiatives, green word of mouth, and university groups. Furthermore, it uncovers the challenges Gen Z faces in sustainable purchasing, such as product unavailability, pricing issues, delivery delays, societal and business unawareness, sustainability skepticism, and the scarcity of sustainable retailers. Importantly, the study addresses the often underexplored cultural and religious dimensions in Eastern developing countries and outlines specific sustainable purchasing practices of Saudi Gen Z, like reusing and repurposing products, avoiding animal skin apparel, purchasing recyclable products, supporting local sustainable entrepreneurs, and minimizing excessive purchases. This research thus offers a comprehensive framework that significantly enhances the understanding of sustainable purchasing behavior among Gen Z in Saudi Arabia.

5. Practical Implications

The study offers several practical implications for various stakeholders in promoting sustainable purchasing behavior among Generation Z in Saudi Arabia. It emphasizes the role of government in initiating awareness programs for younger populations to instill sustainable purchasing habits, leveraging contemporary tools such as social media and gamification [63]. Policymakers are advised to incentivize local businesses that integrate sustainability principles, fostering consumer awareness of these practices [74]. For marketers, the development of robust promotional strategies and assurance of product durability through green marketing is highlighted as crucial in influencing Generation Z’s purchasing decisions [65]. Additionally, the recommendation for local manufacturers to adopt eco-friendly materials in their production processes is suggested to increase the availability of sustainable goods. The study underscores the necessity of collaborative efforts between government and businesses in nurturing a culture of sustainability, contributing to the broader achievement of sustainable development goals.

6. Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers insights into Generation Z’s sustainable purchasing behaviors in Saudi Arabia, its scope has certain limitations that open avenues for future research.

First, the focus on a specific demographic within a unique cultural setting limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should extend this inquiry to diverse age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and different cultural contexts, including comparative analyses between regions or countries. Second, the reliance on qualitative data from interviews, while rich in detail, may introduce social desirability bias. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative measures to validate and expand upon these findings. Additionally, incorporating observational or experimental methods would offer a deeper understanding of the causal relationships among the proposed factors. In addition, an exploration into the impact of digital media and e-commerce on sustainable purchasing decisions across demographics could also provide valuable insights, given the growing influence of technology on consumer behavior.

Furthermore, there is a rich opportunity for longitudinal studies to observe how sustainable purchasing behaviors evolve, especially in response to global environmental challenges or shifts in policy and the global economy. Such studies can also examine how demographic traits like age, gender, and educational attainment affect consumers' propensity to make sustainable purchases. By addressing these areas, future research can build a deep, holistic understanding of sustainable purchasing behaviors across various segments of consumers.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.E. and M.G.; methodology, I.E. and M.G.; software, I.E., validation, I.E., M.G. and O.A.-M.; formal analysis, I.E. and M.G.; investigation, I.E.; resources, O.A.-M.; data curation, I.E.; writing—original draft preparation, I.E. and M.G.; writing—review and editing, I.E. and M.G.; visualization, O.A.-M.; project administration, I.E.; funding acquisition, O.A.-M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was funded by the University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, under grant No. (UJ-24-DR-20522-1). Therefore, the authors thank the University of Jeddah for its technical and financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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