

Price Vs. Principles: Gen Z, Ethical Consumerism, and the Cost of Living

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PRICE VS. PRINCIPLES: GEN Z, ETHICAL CONSUMERISM, AND THE COST OF LIVING

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PRME
an initiative of the
United Nations Global Compact

SDG Alignment: SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)

1. Research Background

The ethical consumerism literature reveals a persistent conflict: while numerous studies identify a significant gap between ethical intentions and actual purchasing behaviour (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018), others suggest that consumers, particularly younger generations, remain committed to ethical values despite market pressures (Hisam et al., 2022).

However, scholarship has yet to explore how Gen Z university students, a financially constrained yet ethically conscious demographic, make sense of this tension in their online consumption choices. Having come of age during periods of economic uncertainty, this cohort is particularly cost-aware, often balancing rising student debt, limited income, and broader cost-of-living pressures (Djafarova & Foots, 2022).

This thesis seeks to address this gap by examining how Gen Z students rationalise, justify, and navigate their past-purchasing decisions on low-cost online platforms, moving beyond hypothetical or future intentions to offer a more grounded understanding of how price sensitivity and ethical considerations interact in shaping consumer agency and behaviour.



Price/Cost of Living vs. Principles

2. Research Aim

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore the impact of price sensitivity on Gen Z university students' ethical purchasing decisions when shopping online on platforms like Temu and Shein, examining how financial constraints shape their perceived agency in making ethical choices.

Research Questions (RQs)

- RQ1: How do Gen Z university students perceive the influence of price sensitivity on their ethical purchasing decisions when shopping on platforms like Temu and Shein?
- RQ2: In what ways do financial constraints shape Gen Z university students' sense of agency in making ethical consumption choices online?
- RQ3: How do Gen Z university students negotiate the tensions between affordability and ethical values in their online purchasing behaviour?



3. Literature Review

Barbarossa and Pastore (2015): Exploring environmentally conscious consumers representations of the barriers for the ethical purchasing gap. One participant notes *'I am willing to pay slightly more (for ethically sourced products), but not a lot, especially when you have got a limited budget each week.'* (p. 199).

Wiederhold and Martinez (2018): Students/Young professionals do not recognise ethical products as an alternative, as they already assume a higher price. Mentioning often a constrained budget due to their position as a student/young professional as a key barrier to ethical purchasing.

Djafarova and Foots (2022): Explores the factors that encourage **Gen Z consumers** to turn an ethical purchase intention into purchase behaviour. Cost mentioned as the strongest barrier hindering the cohort from purchasing ethically. Despite a future desire to purchase ethically, many Gen Z consumers feel limited by their current financial situation.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses ethical theories as the primary guiding lens to underpin and illuminate the meanings participants attach their purchasing behaviours, enabling a deeper understanding of how they articulate and make sense of ethical considerations.

Supporting theories (Attribution Theory, Moral Disengagement Theory) will be used to further explore how participants justify, rationalise, and negotiate the tensions between ethical intent and financial constraint.

NB: Development of this framework is still at the early stage and is being refined.

4. Research Design

A **qualitative, interpretive** centred design, utilising semi-structured interviews is appropriate for this study.

- Ethical consumer behaviour is highly complex and heterogenous, with motivations and price sensitivities varying between individuals and contexts, making qualitative, interpretive methods valuable in uncovering these unique and nuanced perspectives (Cherrier, 2007; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018).
- Semi-structured interviews encourage participants to actively engage, expand on their thoughts, and reflect on their decision-making processes, providing a deeper understanding of the justifications and rationalisations behind ethical consumption inconsistencies (Chatzidakis et al., 2007).



Sampling

- I will follow a purposive sampling approach, interviewing Gen Z University Students at Sheffield Hallam University from a diverse range of courses and disciplines until data saturation is achieved.

5. Potential Contributions

- While existing literature has widely addressed ethical consumer intentions, there remains a significant gap in understanding the factors that influence actual purchasing behaviour, particularly within digital marketplaces and among economically vulnerable populations (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018).
- By isolating price sensitivity as a central factor, this research directly addresses calls for deeper exploration into the reasons why ethical attitudes often fail to translate into ethical actions (Hisam et al., 2022), responding to critiques of the ethical consumption literature suggesting that it tends to overlook the socio-economic realities that shape consumer agency.
- Revelatory Contribution: Advances understanding through utilising multiple frameworks (Attribution Theory, Neutralisation Theory, Moral Disengagement Theory, and Ethical Theories), to unpack students' rationalisations and justifications for ethically inconsistent behaviour.

6. Progress to Date and Key Challenges

- Eight months into the programme, I have successfully passed the first-stage research approval, completed core research methods modules, reviewed key literature, and begun developing my theoretical framework.
- I would value support in developing my theoretical framework. While I have identified a core foundation in ethical theories, I am planning on complementing these by additional theoretical perspectives, and I would benefit from guidance on how to integrate and refine these coherently.

7. References

Scan the QR code for access to the Reference List or contact me at hc5085@hallam.shu.ac.uk for a copy.



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