



Navigating Sustainable Consumption under Saudi Environmental Law (Moral Conviction, Institutional Trust, and Cultural Negotiation among The Saudi Generation Z)

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable consumption has become a cornerstone of environmental policy worldwide, yet the translation of sustainability awareness into consistent consumer behavior remains a persistent challenge. This qualitative study explores the perceptions and lives experiences of young Saudi consumers in relation to sustainable consumption and the emerging Saudi environmental legal framework. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal six key barriers: Legal perception and institutional trust, cultural traditions and the paradox of generosity, structural and market constraints, selective commitment and moral conviction, legal perception and institutional trust. These factors illustrate a disconnect between individual environmental concern and structural enablers that could support sustainable consumer behavior. Theoretically guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the study situates personal attitudes and perceived behavioral control within the broader regulatory context of Saudi Arabia's environmental law reforms under "Vision 2030". The findings highlight a critical policy gap: while environmental regulations have advanced rapidly, enforcement mechanisms, market incentives, and cultural interventions remain insufficient to foster behavioral change among young consumers. The study contributes to the dialogue on consumer sustainability and environmental governance by emphasizing the need for legal, educational, and market-oriented strategies that jointly encourage sustainable lifestyles among the next generation of Saudi citizens.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption, environmental law, Saudi Arabia, Theory of Planned Behavior (TBP), Generation Z, Vision 2030.



1. Introduction

Sustainable consumption is becoming one of the behavioral and governance issues of the twenty-first century, especially concerning the context of rapidly increasing climate change, environmental degradation and resource shortage (Elgammal et al., 2024). Although the global policy agenda has started focusing more on sustainable development goals, the gap between the pro-environmental understandings and the real consumption patterns remains a key issue among both scholars and policymakers (Jackson, 2016; White et al., 2019). Such an attitudinal-behavioral gap is more apparent in the rapidly modernizing economies, where an extremely quick process of economic growth and changing cultural norms alongside institutional changes makes the transfer of environmental values into a daily routine difficult.

Within the framework of Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, the Kingdom has embarked on very ambitious transformation agenda that aims at aligning economic diversification with environmental sustainability (Alhothali et al., 2021). This change is institutionalized in the form of new regulatory frameworks, the most significant of which is the Saudi Environmental Law (2021), and national programs, including the Saudi Green Initiative (Saudi and Middle East Green initiatives, 2025). Combined, these reforms point towards an increased state investment in environmental regulation, efficiency of resources, and sustainability. But even with the increase of formal regulation and policy discussions, limited knowledge is available regarding the way these legal and institutional changes are perceived, lived and bargained at the site of everyday consumption especially among the Generation Z, which considered an important place in this change,

Saudi Gen Z is often placed as the inheritor of the moral majority and the movers of the sustainability initiatives in the future (Elgammal & Al-Modaf, 2023). Global studies always present this generation with a picture of an environmentally conscious, value-driven, and ethically motivated person (Halibas et al., 2025; Li and Hassan, 2023). However, there is also evidence that moral concern is not sufficient in ensuring a stable sustainable consumption, especially under the circumstances when the affordability, accessibility, social expectations, and institutional trust are not aligned (Ghouse et al., 2024; Pinho and Gomes, 2024). These challenges are compounded in the Saudi context by more rooted cultural values of generosity, abundance and hospitality in which the social identity and moral value is commonly played out in the observable consumption behaviors (Elgammal et al., 2024).

Previous studies on sustainable consumption in the Middle East have been more focused on creating awareness, green marketing, and predictors of an attitudinal approach towards pro-environmental conduct (Elgammal et al., 2024). Nevertheless, an increasing body of empirical research shows that reporting a positive attitude doesn't necessarily translate into a positive long-lasting behavioral modification (White et al., 2019). This attitude-behavior gap is especially sharp in newer economies, where it is the institutional credibility, market regulation, and cultural legitimacy that have a decisive influence on determining the consumption practices



(Biswas and Roy, 2015; Gupta and Ogden, 2009). As such, theories that solely focus on individual cognition and do not pay attention to legalization, cultural pattern and structural restrictions provide low levels of explanatory value.

Although the environmental regulation in Saudi Arabia has been expanded, there are no empirical studies of the ways in which the young consumers or Gen Z perceive the concept of sustainability within a changing legal framework. In addition, there is a limited knowledge that shows in what way environmental law and moral conviction, trust in institutions, and expectations at the micro-level interact with each other. Previous studies are mostly concentrated between policy design, corporate environmental responsibility, or generalized public attitudes, whereas the gap in understanding consumer lives of dealing with sustainability presented in an environment of formal regulatory change remains a gap in the region. One of the areas of special interest to Gen Z is that their consumption choices are not only influenced by their personal ethics but also by the perception of regulatory credibility, market transparency, and social judgment (Elgammal et al., 2024).

The psychology of sustainable consumption has been extensively studied using psychological models of sustainable consumption like the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), (Ajzen, 1991). Although TPB is useful in explaining attitudes, norms, and moral obligations, it has not been utilized in explaining the context of institutions and laws where consumption takes place. Previous studies show that institutional trust and regulatory legitimacy are critical factors that influence environmental behavior, but there has been little empirical application of this body of knowledge, especially in non-Western and legally transforming situations (Bostrom, 2006).

In addition, there has been scarce empirical research on the role of moral obligation based on cultural and religious values in the Saudi sustainability literature. Although the growing number of definitions of environmental responsibility suggest that environmental responsibility is an obligation that involves civic and ethical responsibility, the question of whether Gen Z view the authenticity, fairness and enforceability of environmental law and how they affect their readiness to reconcile moral conviction with their consumption behavior remains relatively unexamined.

To fill these gaps, this qualitative study is exploring how Saudi Gen Z navigates sustainable consumption and meets its moral conviction, cultural norms, market structures, and environmental law. Using twenty semi-structured interviews, the research investigates the meaning of sustainability, its justification, limitation, and implementation in the daily consumption choices within the Saudi environmental law boundaries.

In particular, the following objectives are informative of the study. First, to investigate the relationship between moral conviction and ethical responsibility and the sustainable consumption intentions of Saudi Gen Z. Second, to examine the role



of cultural traditions and social norms in affecting, empowering or limiting the practices of sustainable consumption. Third, to incorporate individual morality, cultural expectation, and institutional trust in the explanation of sustainable consumption behavior.

The study is based on Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) to reach those goals and to have a subtle analysis of the interaction of individual-level driving forces and macro-level governance systems in the formation of consumption behavior. Placing these behavioral mechanisms in the framework of the Saudi Environmental Law (2021), the research goes beyond the conventional psychological perspective of TPB and integrates it into the socio-legal framework of accountability, validity, and civic virtue.

Overall, this paper places sustainable consumption within the institutional, cultural, and moral framework of Saudi Vision 2030, showing that the success of national sustainability goals depends not only on regulatory design but also on the ethical participation, trust, and engagement of the younger generation. Hence, the study has several contributions. Theoretically, it enhances the study of sustainability consumption by postulating a socio-legal frame of behavior that understands sustainability as an activity of moral internalization and institutional credibility. It adds to the scarce literature on Gen Z in the Arab world. In practical terms, the results can help guide policymakers, educators and regulators who would like to encourage environmental citizenship by ensuring that legal enforcers fit moral discourses that resonate with the culture.

The remaining of the paper is structured as follows. The theoretical background is described in Section 2. The qualitative technique is explained in Section 3. The empirical results are presented and discussed in Section 4. Implications for theory, policy, and environmental governance are discussed in Section 5.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Generation z and Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption as a form of consumption that lessen the environmental damage and enhances social equity and economic sustainability has recently gained global attention (Elgammal et al., 2024; Parzonko et al., 2021). Recent literature highlights consumption as a wider activity involving decisions on acquisition, use, maintenance, and disposal of products through the product life cycle (Mashishi, 2024). In that context, sustainability is considered socially integrated behaviour, which is defined by values, norms, and institutional circumstances (Alhothali et al., 2023). The growing academic interest in sustainability studies has been drawn to Gen Z as it is more exposed to climate change and digital movement (Halibas et al., 2025; Li and Hassan, 2023). Empirical research is constantly reported to show that Gen Z has high pro-environmental attitudes, sensitivity to ethics, and intergenerational



justice (Somad et al., 2024; Pinho and Gomes, 2024). This generation is often called value-oriented, moralizing, and concerned with the social and environmental consequences of consumption decisions.

Nevertheless, although Gen Z might express their sustainability values in a very strong way, their reality of consumption is usually decentralized, momentary, and price-sensitive, facing scarce access to sustainable options, conflicting social demands (Ghouse et al., 2024; Halibas et al., 2025). Such discrepancy highlights the shortcomings of more attitudinal explanations and is an indication of the necessity to consider more integrative frameworks that incorporate structural, cultural and institutional factors.

2.2. Ethical Consumption and Moral Conviction.

The concept of ethical/moral conviction has become a major explanatory construct of sustainable consumption (Kour, 2024). It is expaining ethical accountability or responsibility that refers to what drives individuals internally to avoid harm, encourage fairness, and act as custodians of the environmental and social resources (Somad et al., 2024). In the case of Gen Z, ethical consumption can be linked to more wide-ranging ideas of climate change, animal rights, and social justice as being part of a moral story, in which identity and sense of purpose are created (Garai-Fodor, 2021). According to recent studies such as Pinho and Gomes, (2024) and Elsharkawi and Sun, (2025), Gen Z does not have uniform moral drivers, but it is more multidimensional. Such scholars reveal that young consumers are driven by the goal to reduce harm, demand equity in the market transactions, and promote sustainable production modes. Ethical consumption is therefore a moral action and a symbolic one where values are openly declared.

Meanwhile, moral motivation is not an independent entity. It is becoming important to scholars that moral obligation is conditional, and it depends on the feasibility of social validation, and institutional support (Ghouse et al., 2024). Gen Z consumers can develop moral exhaustion when green living is too expensive, too inconvenient, or even ineffective (Elgammal et al., 2024). This conditionality is consistent with evidence that ethical intent is weakened by moral action that must make disproportionate sacrifice or with which the action does not produce visible effect. Notably, there is also a social mediation of ethical consumption among Gen Z. Consumer behaviors like, refillable product use, secondhand purchasing or resale sites usually serve as a signal of moral identity (Gurova, 2024). These activities grant both social legitimacy and cultural capital, especially in the digital space where choices in consumption can be readily seen.

The cultural factor is crucial to influence sustainable consumption, especially in societies where consumption is strongly associated with social status and ethical values (Elgammal & Al-Modaf, 2023). Consumption is a common form of generosity, hospitality, and social status, and thus is not aligned with restraint and minimalism



ideals, and collectivist settings (Pinho and Gomes, 2024). Gen Z studies also point out that subjective norms, or beliefs about what is socially approved or expected can support or deter ethical intentions (Djafarova and Foots, 2022). This implies that the social costs and reward of ethical behavior should not be omitted in the explanation of sustainable consumption. Cultural norms will not only define what is being consumed, but also define sustainability itself in terms of interpretation, justification and critique.

2.3. Environmental Law, Institutional Trust and Consumer Behavior.

Environmental law is a highly important but under-researched aspect in sustainable consumption studies (Öztürk et al., 2025). Environmental regulation has been reviewed at the macro level, in terms of its impacts on emissions, productivity, and economic performance (Ahmed et al., 2022; Tian and Feng, 2022). There has been less focus on the ways the consumers feel and think about the environmental law in their daily consumption choices.

Environmental laws include regulatory tools that control product design, labeling, pricing, disposal and producer responsibility throughout the product life cycle (Salzman and Ruhl, 2019). These regulatory tools are especially relevant to Gen Z as, in this generation, the choice of consumption is more likely to be made inside the framework of online platforms, where informational signals, defaults, and verification indicators define behavior (Lunda, 2025). It has been revealed that when regulatory signals are clear, authoritative, and seamlessly integrated into purchase settings, Gen Z is more likely to participate in sustainable activities (Pinho & Gomes, 2024). Nevertheless, the success of regulation requires institutional trust which is the perception that the laws are applied in an unbiased manner, that claims are fulfilled and that there are repercussions to non-observance (Bostrom, 2006). In a situation where institutional trust is low, consumers tend to view sustainable products as a symbol or deception which results in skepticism and disengagement (Israfilova and Bian, 2025).

On the other hand, reasonable enforcement boosts the perceived behavioral control by guaranteeing consumers that their moral decision is consistent with system change. By imposing an upstream obligation on manufacturers, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks standardize product design, durability, and recyclability, and hence make downstream consumer behaviour easier (Brown et al., 2023). With Gen Z, which highly regards convenience and competency, such structural facilitation enhances the relationship between ethical intent and behavior (Djafarova and Foots, 2022).

2.4. Transparency and Trust Building of Information.

One of the most significant ways the environmental law affects the behavior of the consumer is through the information transparency (Tolegenov et al., 2024). Eco-labels, disclosure, and digital product aim to transform complicated data on the environment into consumer-friendly signals (Popowicz et al., 2025). Information that is credible, consistent, and easily available to consumers improves consumer trust and readiness to participate in sustainable consumption, despite a relatively low price increase (Elgammal & Majeed, 2024; Mashishi, 2024). Nevertheless, the growth of the



uncertified labeling and unclear green assertions has created general distrust, especially among the Gen Z (Israfilova & Bian, 2025). The perceptions of greenwashing and label fatigue destroy trust and back the consumer to price, appearance and trends (Font et al., 2017). Such loss of trust underlines the role of the regulatory level and standardization in maintaining ethical consumption.

Studies also indicate that Gen Z is an active participant in building trust by means of digital scrutiny and peer rating as well as online activism (Camarrota & Branca, 2025). Informal enforcement strategies like calling out greenwashing, creating credible brands, and organizing boycotts serve as an addition to formal regulation (Shanor & Light, 2022). But these bottom-up attempts are still dependent on the institutional responsiveness; until the law enforces them, the impact of digital activism will be symbolic over substantive (Musie, 2025).

2.5. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

A theoretical concept that offers an original framework on sustainable consumption decisions is in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). TPB assumes attitude to behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to influence behavior. This model has been popularly used to ethical and sustainable consumption as well as research on Generation Z (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Within the context of environmental responsibility context, sustainability attitudes not only involve cognitive judgments but also moral judgments (Elgammal et al., 2024). Subjective norms reflect the perceived social expectations which are mostly very powerful in collectivist societies. The structural conditions include price, availability and access to credible information which are perceived behavioral control (Elgammal & Al-Modaf, 2023).

Although TPB can provide useful perspectives, we claim in the current study that TPB does not pay enough attention to institutional and legal conditions which influence the perceived control and normative expectations. Such a limitation is especially relevant in regulated consumption spheres where law, enforcement and trust have a prime role (Mohammad & Husted, 2019). To overcome these shortcomings, this paper adds to TPB by introducing two other constructs (i.e., moral obligation and institutional trust). The ethical aspect of sustainability that is not based on instrumental logic is moral obligation, whereas institutional trust indicates trust in the governance mechanisms that empower or limit ethical behavior (Bostrom, 2006). The institutional trust can be seen as an external moderator that influences a subjective norm and a perceived behavioral control. Sustainable behavior obtains social credibility and feasibility when environmental laws are perceived to be realistic and enforced. On the other hand, negligence in enforcement erodes trust, which undermines moral motivation and strengthens this effect of disengagement.



3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to explore how Saudi Gen Z consumers make sense of sustainable consumption in the light of the changing environmental governance system of Saudi Arabia. Such qualitative perspective is especially suitable to investigate the sustainability-related behavior since they belong to moral reasoning, cultural meanings, social expectations, and institutional perceptions (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The Environmental Law (2021) of Saudi Arabia is considered a new legal act, and very little is known about the perception of young consumers regarding its applicability, validity, and effects on the daily routine of consuming products and services. The study aims at creating contextually-inspired findings about the interplay between the personal ethics, cultural norms, and institutional trust that can help refine and expand the current behavioral models, specifically the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). This complies with the recent appeals in the field of sustainability studies to transition away from the attitudinal measures to more context-sensitive descriptions of behavioral change (White et al., 2019).

3.2. Sampling and Participant

Purposive sampling was used to select the study participants who had the potential to deliver information-based accounts pertaining to the research agendas (Patton, 2015). The sample targeted Saudi Gen Z consumers aged between 19-29 because this age group was chosen on three main grounds. To begin with, this population is over-exposed to the concept of sustainability in terms of education, electronic media, and international cultural dynamics. Second, they are placed as consumption change drivers in Saudi Vision 2030. Third, existing studies show that their sustainable consumption practices are unequal and limited even with rather high levels of environmental awareness (White et al., 2019). Accordingly, the study sample included 20 respondents (11 females and 9 males) which is adequate in the qualitative interview research that seeks exploration (Elgammal & Jones, 2007). The respondents were selected across various areas such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Mecca and some smaller cities (e.g., Taif, Tabuk, Abha, Jizan and Hail) so that they can vary in terms of exposure to sustainability programs, market infrastructure, and regulatory visibility.

There was a variety of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants. About three out of five were either current students or recent graduates of universities, and 30 out of five were postgraduates or young professionals. The income levels of the monthly range were below 3,000 SAR (mainly students) to over 10,000 SAR (professionals in the beginning of the career). This heterogeneity helped the study to measure variation in moral commitment, perceived behavioral control,



and access to sustainable options, which are the main theme of the theoretical framework.

The methods used in recruitment were university mailing lists, social media, and young community networks. The informed consent of each participant was received, and ethical approval was free to the research ethics committee at the respective universities according to international standards in the qualitative research.

Cod e	Gende r	Age	Region (City)	Education Level	Occupation/Stat us	Monthl y Income (SAR)	Sustainabili ty Engagemen t Level*
P01	Femal e	21	Jeddah	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P02	Femal e	24	Riyadh	Bachelor (complete d)	Private-sector employee	5,000–8,000	High
P03	Male	22	Damma m	Diploma	Retail staff	3,000–5,000	Low
P04	Femal e	28	Mecca	Master's (ongoing)	Graduate assistant	8,000–10,000	High
P05	Male	19	Taif	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P06	Male	23	Riyadh	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P07	Femal e	25	Jeddah	Bachelor (complete d)	Administrative clerk	5,000–7,000	Low
P08	Femal e	29	Damma m	Master's (complete d)	Engineer	10,000 – 12,000	High
P09	Femal e	20	Abha	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P10	Femal e	27	Medina	Bachelor (complete d)	Sales representative	5,000–7,000	Low
P11	Male	23	Riyadh	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P12	Male	26	Jeddah	Bachelor (complete d)	Banker	8,000–10,000	High
P13	Femal e	22	Tabuk	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P14	Male	25	Jizan	Bachelor (complete)	Marketing assistant	4,000–6,000	Moderate



				d)			
P15	Female	28	Riyadh	Master's (ongoing)	Research assistant	8,000–10,000	High
P16	Male	21	Hail	Diploma	Self-employed	3,000–5,000	Low
P17	Female	24	Jeddah	Bachelor (completed)	Schoolteacher	6,000–8,000	Moderate
P18	Male	22	Dammam	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Moderate
P19	Female	20	Riyadh	Bachelor (ongoing)	Student	< 3,000	Low
P20	Female	29	Mecca	Master's (completed)	Civil servant	10,000 – 12,000	High

3.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect data, and the interviews were held in February-April 2025. The choice of semi-structured interviews was based on offering consistency between the participants and flexibility to delve into the emergent themes (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews took between 40 and 70 minutes and were held face-to-face or through the secure online platforms based on the choice of the participants and their geographical locations (i.e. Zoom). The interview guide was built on the preceding literature and addressed five main areas: Individual perceptions of sustainable consumption and its meaning; Ethical responsibility, moral responsibility, and environmental concern; Practices of everyday consumption and perceived limitation; Social and cultural factors influencing the choice of consumption; and Attitudes to the law on the environment, institutional legitimacy and trust in government, and business.

The questions that were posed as probes were designed to make a respondent think even further in terms of the moral rationale, social legitimacy, and perceived institutional efficiency. The interviews were held in Arabic, which is the mother tongue of the participants to make them feel comfortable and expressive. Notes were taken and some interviews were recorded with the consent of the partners and transcribed verbatim and translated into English by bilingual researchers. This was done to guarantee semantic accuracy as translations were cross-validated with original transcripts, which is best practice in cross-language qualitative research (Van Nes et al., 2010).

3.4. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed based on the six-phase method suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Thematic analysis was selected because it is flexible and



fits qualitative investigation based on the theory and is at the same time attuned to voices of the participants.

Data was managed and coding data manually to enable organization, comparison, and visualization of themes. This analysis was a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches to coding. Inductively, patterns of recurring themes like moral obligation, cultural conflict, institutional cynicism, and market availability were derived out of the data. Deductively, these codes were coded on to constructs based on the TPB that included attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, the extended notions of moral obligation, environmental identification and institutional trust.

To increase the depth of analytical rigor, code decisions and interpretations forming during debriefing were debriefing during three researcher-to-researcher peer debriefing sessions. Any discrepancies were worked out by the means of discussion, during which the raw data might have been referred to, and conceptual coherence and limited personal interpretive bias were guaranteed (Miles et al., 2014).

3.5. Demonstrating Trustworthiness and Rigor

This study meets the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, which are the requirements of trustworthiness as provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was also achieved by sampling diversity in regions and sustainability levels of engagement and reflection by the members, who were asked to provide comments on pre-interpretations of the major themes. While reliability was ensured by keeping a clear audit trail that captured the procedures of interviews, their code assignments, and the analytic memos, confirmability was enforced using reflexive journaling and separate examination of the consistency of the coding by a second researcher. The rich and contextualized description of the participants and the Saudi socio-legal environment reinforced transferability because readers were able to evaluate the applicability of the findings to other similar settings in the Middle East and elsewhere. All data were made anonymous and were stored safely, identifying information was deleted to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study results demonstrate that there is a compound interplay among moral conviction, cultural expectations, market structures, and institutional trust in determining the sustainable consumption of Saudi Gen Z. Although the participants expressed their ethical inclination towards environmental accountability, their consumption behaviors were often limited by structural constraints, culturally ingrained codes of being generous and a mixed view of regulatory enforcement. The results are analyzed in terms of the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) along with the knowledge concerning Saudi environmental law and literature on the topic of regulatory credibility and institutional trust.

On the general level three dynamic interactions occurred. The idea of sustainability was popularly introduced as socially right and personally significant. Second, the existing cultural traditions of generosity and hospitality weakened pro-sustainability



social demands. Third, high prices, a lack of available and credible green products, and a lack of trust in the market actors contributed to perceived behavioral control. Combined, the above dynamics imply that sustainable consumption by Saudi Gen Z is not a subject of awareness and values but a subject of institutional provisioning and cultural bargaining.

4.1. Thematic Analysis Process

The initial stages of the thematic approach involved open coding of the interview transcripts wherein 97 preliminary codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These codes were summarised through the process of comparison and refinement into 12 narrow codes, which in turn were further organized into four umbrella themes that included the moral, structural, cultural, and institutional aspects of sustainable consumption. Peer debriefing and code comparison were used to increase the rigor of the analysis, whereas the credibility and authenticity were strengthened with the help of the thick description and verbatim quotes.

4.2. Selective Commitment and Moral Conviction

In all interviews, sustainability was persistently discussed as a moral obligation instead of a lifestyle trend based on responsibility, faith and generational responsibility. The respondents often defined environmentally responsible consumption as a continuation of personal integrity that had been previously explored regarding values-driven consumption in the context of Gen Z (Garai-Fodor, 2021; Parzonko et al., 2021; Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). Being sustainable, as defined by one of the respondents “is doing what is right rather than looking modern or different” (interview 6, M23Y, Riyadh). But such high moral orientation did not lead to regular or habitual behavior. Rather, the respondents explained what can be termed as selective commitment whereby sustainable options were implemented only depending on the respondent’s degree of affordability, convenience, or availability “I think I’m only an environmental responsible person when I have enough money to purchase sustainable products” (Interview 9, F20, Abha).

Intention of morality, which existed, was often compromised with real restrictions. This tension was picked up by one participant, who put it into a nutshell as follows: “I am aware that it is my duty to take care of the environment, but the green alternative is twice as expensive, and I cannot always afford it” (Interview 12, M26Y, Jeddah). Another added “I attempt to make myself sustainable without disturbing my day-to-day life too much” (Interview 3, M22Y, Dammam). This observation is much like TPB, especially, the perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Although the responses to sustainability were extremely favorable, they could not support behavior where the structural conditions limited the choice.

Moral conviction was an internal drive, yet its manifestation in behavior was conditional on the external possibility. As one who was interviewed said, “Good



intentions are not sufficient when the system gets in the way” (Interview 15, F28Y, Riyadh). Legally, this subject matter demonstrates a remarkable conflict in the Saudi Environmental Law (2021). Though this legislation focuses on environmental responsibility and sustainable development, the respondents felt that there were no consumer-centered instruments, including price incentives or the subsidies or standardized eco-labeling, to carry moral dedication into the daily consumption activities. In the role of one of the participants, it is stated that, "The law talks about safeguarding the environment, but it does not actually assist me as a consumer to do it” (Interview 4, F28Y, Mecca). Without institutional reinforcement, moral conviction was incidental and not routinized leading to conditional sustainable consumption as opposed to habitual sustainable consumption.

4.3. Structural and Market Constraints

Barriers in the structure and market were the leading drivers whose influence affected the consumption judgments of the participants. Sustainable consumption was often termed as something good in theory but not viable in practice. Green products were described by respondents repeatedly as having been scarce, costly, and unreliable, a view that supports a notion that sustainability is a luxury and not a normal option (Dinh et al., 2024). According to one of the participants, "When sustainable products were ubiquitous and affordable, people would purchase them” (Interview 11, M23Y, Riyadh). Respondents were completely skeptical about eco-labels and corporate sustainability pronouncements, echoing more general ideas of the Gen Z about performative environmentalism (Israfilova and Bian, 2025). One of the respondents was direct, “I no longer trust labels; they are simply putting the term eco before the price to rationalize it” (Interview 14, M25Y, Jizan), another one remarked, “There is simply no way that I would know whether a product is indeed sustainable or this is simply marketing” (Interview 1, F21Y, Jeddah). These images show that there is a gap in implementation between market governance and environmental regulation, which is echoed by (Handoyo & Anas, 2024; Lövbrand et al., 2009).

Despite the requirement of the Saudi Environmental Law (2021) of business accountability towards the environment (Badran et al., 2024), respondents indicated that there is a limited presence of enforcement, monitoring, or transparent certification mechanisms. This is consistent with regulatory scholarship which views that formal rules do not work on their own and need believable enforcement strategies (Bostrom, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2022). Their explanation as one interviewee discussed is that, unless companies are indeed monitored then sustainability remains a slogan. It is worth noting that the results indicate that the critical element would be institutional trust and not the environmental knowledge or motivation that affected sustainable behavior. Poor credibility of the regulations weakened both symbolic and practical involvement in sustainability, bringing about disengagement to even environmentally concerned participants. This strengthens the point that sustainable consumption is more of an institutional and governance concern than it is an individual choice.



4.4. Cultural Traditions and the Paradox of Generosity

Among other study themes, the one related to the paradox of generosity were culturally specific and theoretically important. The participants mentioned hospitality, abundance, and social generosity as the main aspects of Saudi identity, and at the same time admitted that they contribute to waste and overconsumption (Elgammal et al., 2024). One of the participants was reminiscent that, as one of them put it, "Generosity is what we are, yet it occasionally goes overboard" (Interview 12, M26Y, Jeddah). This conflict was most evident in eating habits and socializing. One of the interviewees observed, "We prepare more food than we require since it would be rude to prepare less when visitors are around" (Interview 7, F25Y, Jeddah), and the other stated, "When you want to reduce or save, then, people will assume that you are stingy" ((Interview 10, F27Y, Madina). These stories show how sustainability initiatives may go into contradiction with entrenched social norms. This theme is important as far as TPB is concerned because it underlines the strength of the subjective norms to override personal moral attitudes (Ajzen, 1991).

Although participants themselves supported sustainable consumption, there were powerful cultural norms that stressed on abundance and social showmanship, which usually limited behavior alteration. This type of dynamics has already been reported in previous research on Gen Z consumption, in which the social pressures restrict ethical action (Pinho and Gomes, 2024; Ghouse et al., 2024). This discovery raises a cultural blind spot on sustainability governance, which is legally and policy wise. While the focus of Vision 2030 was on efficiency and recycling (Sharawi, 2024), participants believed that sustainability efforts did not go far enough to deal with the problem of consumption practices that were entrenched in culture. As one of the respondents noted, "The message is recycling, however, not how our traditions are a source of waste as well' (Interview 8, F29Y, Dammam). These results suggest that the employment of legal mechanisms should be complemented by culturally relevant narratives in which giving is viewed as responsibility rather than excess.

4.5. Legal Perception and Institutional Trust

Moral conviction, structural controls and cultural norms were cross-cutting themes, and the issue of institutional trust developed. The participants reported a sense of cautious hopefulness when it comes to the sustainability agenda in Saudi Arabia but were concerned about the inconsistency in enforcement, lack of transparency, and company accountability. One participant commented, "Laws and announcements exist, but companies are never punished in my opinion" (Interview 15, F28Y, Riyadh), another responded, "I would feel more useful in case companies were placed under clear control" (Interview 5, M19Y, Taif). These images shed light on the mediating effect of institutional trust on the intention-behavior correlation. Without the apparent responsibility, by way of any plausible eco-labels, inspection, or sanction, individual action was seen as symbolically feeble or insignificant. According to one of the interviewees, "Why should I fight, when the companies can get away with breaking the rules?" (Interview 20, F29Y, Mecca).



This finding corroborates the view that regulatory credibility is a prerequisite to the involvement of the masses in sustainability programs as presented by Bostrom (2006). It is, in theory, a TPB extension, which places institutional trust as a modifying factor between perceived behavioral control and subjective norms. On a legal perspective, it highlights the need to reinforce enforcement of the Saudi Environmental Law (2021), specifically to address greenwashing and increase transparency. Together, these themes represent a continuing conflict between moral desire and institutional determination. The level of moral commitment to sustainability is high among Saudi Gen Z, in line with the trends among youth all over the world (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022; Halibas et al., 2025). Nevertheless, their consumption habits are bargained within a terrain of market constraints, cultural imperatives and institutional uncertainty.

According to the study results, moral conviction triggers motivation, institutional trust maintains continuity and structural and cultural circumstances characterize the feasibility. Sustainable consumption, then, cannot be limited to a personal option; it is an intermediate practice in society, a practice legally conditioned. Policy-wise, these results may imply the development of Saudi environmental laws to be more than a compliance-based regulation to consumer-based tools, such as standardized eco-labels, price subsidies, and open access corporate reporting. On the societal level, sustainability communication must incorporate the environmental responsibility functions, with the cultural and religious senses, redefining sustainability as the manifestation of faith, national identity, and responsible generosity.

With the help of such integration, sustainable consumption can become not one person against all of nature, but a moral conflict that can be supported and reinforced by institutions and that can be entrenched in legal, cultural and ethical structures of Saudi society.

5. Theoretical Contributions

This study has several theoretical contributions; first, it builds upon the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) by empirically proving that institutional trust is a central structural moderator of behavioral intention and behavioral legislation. Although TPB has been extensively used to explain sustainable consumption by Gen Z (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022; Somad et al., 2024), previous implementations have mostly operationalized the perceived behavioral control and subjective norms on an individual level. The results demonstrate that the two constructs in question are quite conditional upon the perceptions of regulatory credibility, enforcement visibility, and market governance. Through institution trust, perceived behavioral control is formed by influencing the perceived sustainability options as feasible, true, and significant. At the same time, it affects subjective norms by indicating the presence of sustainability as socially approved and enforced economically or promoted symbolically. Using institutional



trust as a component of TPB, the present study contributes to a more structurally based behavioral framework, which is more appropriate in the context of regulated consumption, specifically among emerging economies where the legal framework is more unevenly applied and market integration is not completely realized.

Second, the research provides a contribution towards sustainability ethics through the enhancement of the notion of the moral conviction in consumption. Instead of moral obligation being a steady or unconditionally activating force, the results conceptualize moral conviction as being selective, situational, conditionally enacted. It was demonstrated that only structural, cultural and institutional conditions enabled us to activate ethical commitments. The point of view opposes linear values-behavior models and helps clarify recent criticism in the research on Gen Z that underscores situational pragmatism over presumed ethical behavioral consistency (Garai-Fodor, 2021; Ghouse et al., 2024). Moral conviction is therefore a necessary but insufficient condition of sustainable consumption which needs reinforcement on an institutional/cultural level to become a practice.

Third, the research supports the cultural theories of sustainable consumption by the reconceptualization of culture as a fixed obstacle, but rather as a bargained normative space. The identified paradox of generosity in the findings demonstrates the strength of culturally approved norms (including hospitality and abundance) that contribute to social cohesion and restrain environmental regulation at the same time. This contribution transcends the reductive cultural explanations because it shows how sustainability is being actively understood, defended and challenged in culturally significant ways. It is a response to the demands to have more culturally embedded sustainability research, which points to the weakness of universalized behavioral interventions in the context of tightly related social identity, morality, and consumption (Pinho & Gomes, 2024).

Lastly, the study has the contribution to environmental governance research by filling the gap between the environmental law and micro-level consumer behavior. Although much of the available literature has viewed the macroeconomic and productivity impact of environmental regulation (Ahmed et al., 2022; Tian and Feng, 2022), this paper shed lights on the Saudi Gen Z consumer experience and perception of Saudi environmental law by.

6. Practical Implications

The study has several practical implications to policymakers, educators and corporate executives who are involved in ensuring the sustainability transition in Saudi Arabia. First, the results demonstrate the necessity of the so-called integrated governance solutions which would increase environmental citizenship, regulatory compliance, and cultural legitimacy. Awareness or moral appeal sustainability initiatives will hardly be successful without institutional credibility and structural viability. Second, authorities



may think of creating a national standardized eco-labeling system, with independent auditors, the life-cycle assessment criteria, and punitive actions on defaulters. Such a structure would minimize information asymmetry, prevent greenwashing and make the environmental law operational at the consumer level.

Third, the continuity of cost perceptions implies the significance of economic instruments in promoting sustainable consumption. Specialized incentives (e.g. subsidies of low-impact products, digital loyalty programs, preferential loans, etc.) may reduce the economic impact of sustainable decisions. These tools can be used to bring sustainable products to normalcy in the market when used in conjunction with credible labeling and enforcement. Fourth, educational institutions may be very instrumental by integrating the principles of experiential and project-based sustainability learning in the form of fieldwork, innovation laboratories, community engagements, and environmental entrepreneurship programs. These strategies can assist young consumers in bringing moral commitments to life and position sustainability as a form of social innovation and economic opportunity.

These implications suggest the importance of models of governance where legal power, cultural meaning, and motivation to act in a particular way reinforce each other and help achieve the Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 of responsible consumption, and environmental management.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like any other qualitative research, this study is limited in nature and provides research directions in the future. First, while the sample size was adequate for the study nature, this restricts statistical generalizability. Future studies should use mixed-method or cross-national designs to establish the relevance of the study results on larger and more diverse populations. Second, the emphasis made on Gen Z limits comparison based on age. Future studies could seek to examine whether intergenerational disparities of moral obligation, institutional trust, and cultural negotiation might help enhance the understanding of how sustainability orientations change throughout the course of life.

Third, the use of self-reported interviews increases the chances of social desirability bias. Future studies would then be able to triangulate results with a behavioral observation or purchase data or experimental data to determine the differences between stated intention and actual consumption behaviors. Lastly, institutional trust was discussed in general. Future research may deconstruct trust among actors, government, corporations, NGOs, to investigate the different impacts on sustainable consumption. These extensions may help in understanding the sustainability transitions in emerging economies more profoundly.

8. Conclusion

This paper emphasize that environmental laws are not enough to guide Saudi Arabia on its way towards sustainable consumption. Instead, it is hinged on the consistency between the institutional plausibility, cultural signification, and moral drive. Saudi

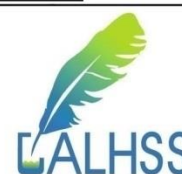


Gen Z have high moral orientations of sustainability, but consumption is at situational and broken levels because of market restrictions, cultural expectations and perceived gaps in regulation application. Sustainable consumption is not yet a stable or determined behavioral pattern, but a conditional social practice, mobilised when feasibility, social legitimacy and institutional trust are all present. Environmental law, as representing symbolic strength, needs to be made visible and believable in the real-life market, to be behaviorally relevant.

This study contributes to a multi-layered perspective of sustainable consumption negotiated culturally and institutionally by demonstrating the extent to which sustainability is morally absorbed within the Saudi environmental regulation. It implies that the new stage of the Vision 2030 does not only consist in increasing regulatory provisions, but in changing the notion of sustainability into concrete, enforceable, and culturally appealing social practice.

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