

Sustainable Choices in Fashion: Insights into Gen Z's Purchasing Behaviour

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Abstract. As a significant global polluter, the fashion industry grapples with critical environmental, social, and governance (ESG) challenges. This study investigates Gen Z's buying behaviour towards sustainable apparel, a consumer group whose choices can significantly shape the industry, particularly as their decisions are increasingly mediated by digital platforms, social media algorithms, and information systems that shape online fashion retail experiences. The fashion industry, notorious for its high environmental impact, is undergoing a paradigm shift driven by consumer demand for sustainability. This research aims to understand how social media, brand loyalty, perceived risk, and product quality impact Gen Z's purchase intentions for sustainable clothing. The study employs a cross-sectional survey, gathering data from 187 respondents, predominantly young adults in India. The findings indicate that social media influence, brand loyalty, perceived risk, and product quality significantly influence purchase intentions. The research framework highlights the importance of targeted marketing strategies, emphasizing personalized experiences, robust return policies, and maintaining high product standards, supported by AI-driven recommendation systems, AR-enabled try-on technologies, and blockchain-enabled transparency tools. By adopting sustainable practices, the fashion industry can align with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contributing to responsible consumption, climate action, and economic growth. The study underscores the need for comprehensive

Keywords: brand loyalty, perceived quality, perceived risk, sustainability, ESG

1. Introduction

The fashion industry, at this crucial juncture, is presented with a unique opportunity to swiftly adopt sustainable practices that can effectively address the pressing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concerns of our era. As the second-largest polluter globally, fashion is responsible for a staggering 10% of worldwide carbon emissions and a significant 20% of wastewater production. However, the industry's heavy reliance on natural resources and its substantial waste output have sparked a demand for more conscientious and ethical practices, signalling potential for positive change.

Consumer behaviour is undergoing a rapid and significant transformation, with a growing market segment placing sustainability at the forefront of their purchasing decisions. A recent survey by McKinsey & Company in 2021 found that 67% of consumers consider the use of sustainable materials to be a crucial factor when buying apparel. Moreover, the same study revealed that 63% of respondents view brand transparency as a pivotal factor in their purchasing choices. This shift is not only reshaping consumer expectations but also compelling brands to integrate ESG strategies into their core operations. The fashion sector, in particular, has accelerated its adoption of sustainable practices in response to the worsening effects of the climate crisis (Karadayi-Us, 2024). Notably, the use of digitalization and artificial intelligence for environmentally friendly applications is increasingly expanding.

Hence, related to these changes, technology mediation is quite imperative in determining consumer behaviour. Today Gen Z is assessing brands and products more and more through social media, e-commerce applications, and intelligent retail systems as critical information infrastructures. Features like AI driven recommendation systems, AR fitting rooms and blockchain enabled supply chain traceability bring transparency to reduce risk and build trust in the sustainable fashion retail space. These developments show that sustainability-oriented choices cannot be detached from the technical infrastructures through which they are facilitated, enacted and restricted.

The environmental impact of fashion extends well beyond carbon emissions and resource depletion. The industry is a significant contributor to ocean pollution, with microplastics from synthetic fibers accounting for a staggering 35% of microplastics released into the environment. Additionally, the sector's reliance on water-intensive crops like cotton exacerbates water scarcity issues in vulnerable regions. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes sustainable material sourcing, efficient production processes, and innovative recycling techniques.

Socially, the fashion industry has long been scrutinized for its labour practices, including poor working conditions, low wages, and exploitative labour. The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, which claimed over 1,100 lives, underscored the dire need for improved labour standards and corporate accountability. However, conditions are increasingly adopting fair trade practices, ensuring safe working conditions, and providing fair wages to their workers. These efforts, though still work in progress, are crucial to fostering a more equitable and just industry, offering a glimmer of hope for a better future.

Governance, the third pillar of ESG, involves companies' ethical management and accountability. Transparent reporting, ethical supply chain management, and stakeholder engagement are becoming standard practices for leading fashion brands. According to a 2020 report by Fashion Revolution, only 40% of significant brands disclose their supply chain partners, highlighting the need for greater transparency and accountability in the industry.

This article explores the innovative ESG strategies shaping sustainable apparel's future. It delves into how leading brands integrate sustainability into their core values, the challenges they face, and the remarkable progress made towards a more sustainable and ethical fashion industry. By examining these developments, we aim to provide insights into the evolving landscape of sustainable fashion and highlight the importance of ESG initiatives in driving long-term change.

Through this research, we seek to underscore the critical role that ESG strategies play in mitigating the environmental and social impacts of fashion and driving consumer trust and brand loyalty. As the industry moves towards a more sustainable future, these strategies must be embraced and implemented

at all levels, from high-end luxury brands to fast fashion.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Theory Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The study is theoretically based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) to predict sustainable fashion purchase intentions of Gen Z. Behavioural intention is defined by TPB along three dimensions: attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control. Brand loyalty and product quality, in this study, typify consumers' attitude toward sustainable fashion; social media acts as a function of subjective norms by depicting peer pressure and influencer influence; while perceived risk corresponds with perceived behavioural control: the greater the consumer's perception of risk, the less capable they are to do what they intend. By placing our constructs in

2.2. Social Media and Purchase Intention

Social media can be defined as online applications, platforms, and media that encourage communication, collaboration, and content sharing (Erkan and Evans, 2016, as cited in Sun, Wang, 2020). Many types of social media exist, such as Facebook, Twitter, and weblogs. Social media allows users to connect with people who share similar interests. Further, on social media, users can share and post their original ideas and content. Social media marketing presents a chance for businesses to develop online marketing strategies because consumers can use social media to gather information and use that information to their purchase decisions (Sun & Wang, 2020). In addition, previous studies found that social media impacts consumer purchase intention.

Erlangga et al. (2021) found that social media marketing influences consumers purchasing intentions on SME products. Another study by Bilal et al. (2014, as cited in Husnain & Toor, 2017) revealed Pakistanis buying intentions using online platforms inspired by the usage of social media. They use social media to collect information about various companies. Moreover, Husnain and Toor (2017) identified social network marketing as significantly connected to consumer purchase behaviour. This study used consumer engagement as a mediator to find out how social network marketing has an influence on consumer purchase behaviour. Furthermore, Priporas et al. (2017) stated that Generation Z prefers faster transactions and increased autonomy through the latest technology. Providing sufficient training on using these intelligent retailing applications also empowers them to make suitable purchasing decisions. These findings show social media's influence on consumer purchase intention. Hence, the first hypothesis was developed to investigate whether social media influences Gen Z's purchase intention.

H1: Social media has a significant relationship with purchase intention

2.3. Brand loyalty and purchase intention

The brand loyalty is related to purchase intention. Customers loyal to a brand are customers who return repeatedly to buy the brand because they are emotionally attached and committed to it. It shows the significance of frequent buying. Also, it highlights customers' opinions towards a brand referred to as loyal. Numerous studies support the idea that brand loyalty positively impacts purchase intention. Previous research like Cagnin and Nicolas (2022) revealed that value for money, customer experience strategy, and pleasurable content are necessary for Gen Z brand loyalty for purchase. As for Generation Z, ethics and authenticity are not very important. Cagnin and Nicolas (2022) also highlighted that brand loyalty needs to be considered a multi-dimensional concept rather than a unit. Further, Gen Z prospects do not have the same effect on attitude and behavioural loyalty. Hence, marketers need to consider this when they develop a strategy.

Furthermore, Pinto and Paramita (2021) stated that social media influencers strongly influence

Generation Z's purchase intention. This means that social media influencers play a crucial role in attracting Generation Z. This study highlighted that Generation Z is more focused on the credibility of influencers than on their attractive appearance. Marketers need to get suitable social media influencers to promote their products since a good reputation may impact the brand.

This study also highlighted that Generation Z is quickly getting bored. However, if they provide unique, they may become loyal customers. This shows Generation Z's mindset is different when it comes to purchasing a product. In addition, previous studies like Andhini and Andanawarih (2022) also pointed out that brand stories positively impact customers' opinions towards a brand and their purchase intention. Moreover, Hien et al. (2020) found that a positive brand image will develop customer trust in the brand and inspire them to purchase intention. Therefore, a second hypothesis was developed to identify whether brand loyalty influences Gen Z's purchase intention.

H2: Brand loyalty has a significant relationship with purchase intention

2.4. Perceived risk and purchase intention

Perceived risks are customers' views on uncertainty and possible adverse outcomes of purchasing a service or product (Kim et al., 2008). When consumers do online shopping, the perceived risk needs to be considered. For example, consumers should be aware of privacy and security risks (Wani and Malik, 2013, as cited in Raharja and Hadisumarto, 2021). Moreover, Numerous studies have highlighted many risks related to consumers' purchase intention, such as time, financial, social, psychological, physical, and performance risks (Pires et al., 2004; Galati et al., 2021). Further, Raharja and Hadisumarto (2021) identified that observed risk of perception showed a negative impact on purchase intentions. Product, time, and psychological risks are identified as having the highest negative influence on online purchase intentions during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study also highlighted that companies can decrease perceived risks that may hurt consumer purchase intentions by considering variances in risk perceptions. In addition, Deshbhag and Mohan (2020) revealed that perceived risk significantly inspired 250 Indian consumers of consumer goods for purchase intention. Moreover, Anh (2024) explored the relationship between risk factors and online purchase intention in the clothing industry.

Recent evidence further reinforces the critical role of perceived risk in digital retail contexts. Chu et al. (2023), study on online grocery shopping, found that perceived risk remained a significant determinant of consumers' intention to continue using digital platforms even beyond the pandemic. Likewise, Mohd et al. (2023), contribution on facial recognition payment systems, demonstrated that risk perceptions strongly influenced Malaysians' intention to adopt this emerging technology, underscoring the cross-sectoral importance of digital trust and risk management. From a service quality perspective, Lubis et al. (2025) showed that on-time delivery significantly enhanced Gen Z loyalty, mediated by trusted payment methods, suggesting that reducing transactional risks can improve consumer commitment. These findings revealed a significant relationship between psychological, social, and time risks and online purchase intention. Based on these explanations, a third hypothesis was developed to identify whether perceived risk influences Gen Z Purchase intention.

H3: Perceived risk has a significant relationship with purchase intention

2.5. Product quality and purchase intention

Product quality plays a vital role in consumer purchase intention. Consumers' experience regarding a product will impact the attitude of consumers towards a product, as experience will provide them with an idea of the product. In addition, Francis and Hoefel (2018) discussed traits of Generation Z. According to this study, Generation Z consumers prefer more on the quality of a product. Counterfeit goods are not essential when compared with the original product. Further, Mirabi et al. (2015) highlighted that product quality is a significant factor supporting the consumers' purchase intention. The link is also supported in the e-commerce setting by customer experience research. Davidavičienė

et al. (2020) pointed out various triggers for the enhancement of customers' online shopping experiences and suggested that perceptions of product quality in combination with reliable service characteristics play an important role when it comes to consumers' intention to buy at all. This result highlights the significance of product quality in overall customer experience also in online settings where consumers cannot inspect a physical product prior to purchase. Similarly, Pujiastuti et al. (2022) stated that halal labels positively affected Generation Z Muslim students when purchasing food items.

Within sustainable fashion, Gen Z consumers are even more responsive to these product quality cues such as authenticity of materials, eco-certifications and durability that help reduce uncertainty and build trust. Stable digital attributes interesting product information, transparent origin data and solid publicity background are positive qualities that can enhance purchase intention. Yeo et al. (2022) also found that perceived quality resulting from AI-generated product recommendations had a positive impact on the consumer's intention to purchase in fashion e-commerce, further evidencing technology-mediated product judgments. Moreover, Hidayat et al. (2023) stated that halal labels on food items indicate that Muslims can eat the food. The halal logo provides information on the quality of products that Muslims can consume. Hence, a fourth hypothesis was developed to determine whether product quality influences Gen Z's purchase intention.

H4: Product quality has a significant relationship with purchase intention

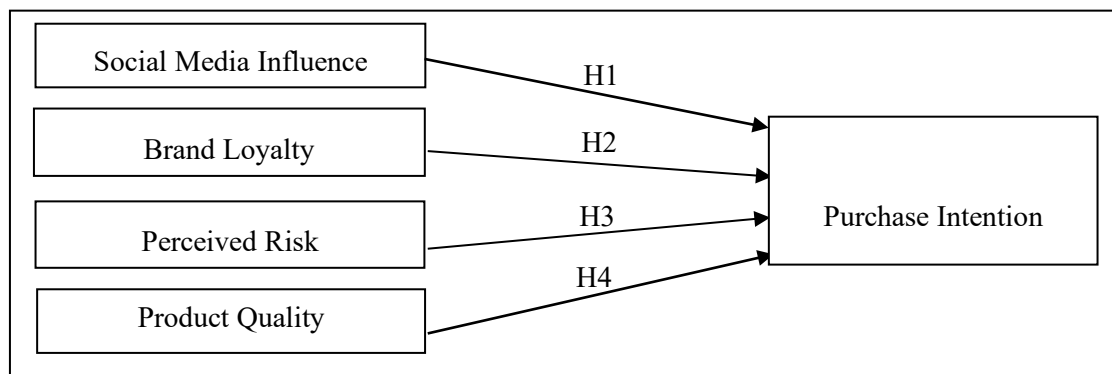


Fig. 1: Research framework

3. Methodology

Data were collected from February to April 2023. The participants, who were Indians with experience purchasing all kinds of fashion apparels, were recruited over an online survey questionnaire using a cross-sectional study. The survey was distributed through various online platforms and social media channels to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The minimum sample size required for this survey is 129, based on the calculation from G*Power software. At the beginning of the survey, just before the screening questions, there was some brief information about the study. Most of the measuring scales included in this research are derived from previous studies and with modifications to suit the needs of this study. The choice of these studies was based on their relevance to the research topic and their robustness in the field of consumer behaviour and purchased of clothing. There was total 23 measurement items were adapted from previous studies (Apiraksattayakul, 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Yeo et al. 2021).

4. Findings

With 187 datasets statistically analysed on five constructs and twenty-three latent variables in PLS-SEM, the success response rate is 74.8 percent. The sample (n = 187) was calculated with G*Power

analysis that confirmed good fit for the PLS-SEM model intended and the power to detect small-medium effects. However, the sample is limited to India, skewed towards Tamil Nadu and young, highly educated individuals thus limiting the transferability of findings among broader Gen Z populations. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of this study also prevails the inferred causation and relationships are deemed as associations only.

Based on the demographic profile data, the majority of respondents are young adults aged between 20-25 years, with a significant portion residing in Tamil Nadu. This group is highly educated, with 69.5% holding post-graduate degrees, and a substantial 54.5% are employed full-time. Income levels among respondents show a dominant trend, with 74.3% earning Rs. 15500 and above per month, indicating a highly affluent demographic. Gender distribution is fairly balanced, though slightly skewed towards males at 56.1%. The preference for clothing brands reveals that Max Fashion is the most popular choice, favoured by 43.9% of respondents, followed by Allen Solly at 17.6%. Other brands like Fab India, Pantaloons, and Raymond also have notable followings.

Regarding purchasing behaviour, most respondents (86.6%) report buying clothes via apps 1-5 times per month, reflecting a strong inclination towards online shopping. This trend aligns with the high levels of education and income, suggesting a tech-savvy and economically stable group. The diversity in occupation, with a mix of students, part-time, and full-time employed individuals, highlights a varied yet connected consumer base. The data underscores the crucial importance of targeted marketing strategies for this demographic, focusing on their preferred brands and shopping habits to maximize engagement and sales.

4.1 Measurement Model

The measuring model was evaluated based on construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The cut off value of 0.5 is used as proposed by Hair et al. (2019). As a result, the item PI1, which has a loading of 0.010, was deleted. Additionally, the items PR1 and PR3, with loadings of 0.720 and 0.638, were also deleted. The analysis was rerun and the new loadings and cross loadings were obtained as depicted in Table 1. All AVE values for this sample were higher than the threshold value of 0.5 from 0.586 to 0.776. As can be seen in Table 1, all the composite reliability values ranging from 0.848 to 0.912 exceeded the cut off value of 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). As such, based on the composite reliability, we can conclude that the measurement is reliable. To assess the discriminant validity of the constructs, Henseler et al. (2015) recommended using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of correlations, which is based on a multitrait-multimethod matrix. However, an issue arises with discriminant validity when the HTMT value exceeds the value of 0.90 (Gold & Arvind Malhotra, 2001). All values presented in Table 2 were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, indicating that discriminant validity was established.

Table 1. Measurement model

Constructs	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Social Media Influencer	SMI1	0.770	0.621	0.891
	SMI2	0.861		
	SMI3	0.869		
	SMI4	0.741		
	SMI5	0.684		
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.804	0.606	0.885
	BL2	0.766		
	BL3	0.673		
	BL4	0.808		
	BL5	0.832		
Product Quality	PQ1	0.656	0.609	0.886

Perceived Risk	PQ2	0.802		
	PQ3	0.804		
	PQ4	0.802		
	PQ5	0.827		
	PR1	0.720	0.586	0.848
	PR2	0.857		
	PR3	0.638		
	PR4	0.826		
Purchase Intention	PI2	0.881	0.776	0.912
	PI3	0.879		
	PI4	0.882		

Table 2. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	BL	PR	PQ	PI	SMI
BL	0.803				
PR	0.665	0.812			
PQ	0.803	0.812	0.799		
PI	0.740	0.775	0.799	0.853	
SMI	0.814	0.726	0.842	0.853	0.814

Diagonals (in bold) represent the squared roof of average variance extracted (AVE) while the other entries represent the correlations.

BL= Brand loyalty, PR=Perceived risk, PI= Purchase Intention, PQ = Product quality, SMI= Social media influencer.

4.2 Structural Model

Table 3 shows the results of hypotheses testing on direct relationships in the structural model. The results were impressive the suggested research model (i.e., purchase intention) explained a whopping 62.5% of the variation in the major endogenous dimension. It seems that this model hit the nail right on the head.

Table 3. Structural Model

Hypotheses	Path	Std Beta	Std Error	t-value	t-value	Decision
H1	SMI -> PI	0.369	0.099	3.711	0.000	Supported
H2	BL -> PI	0.136	0.086	1.572	0.058	Supported
H3	PR -> PI	0.254	0.143	1.774	0.038	Supported
H4	PQ -> PI	0.153	0.091	1.677	0.047	Supported

Table 3 shows the results of hypothesis testing on direct relationships in the structural model. The significance of path coefficients was determined to decide whether a hypothesis is supported. Among the four determinants for purchase intention, brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.136$, $t = 1.572$, $p < 0.01$), perceived risk ($\beta = 0.254$, $t = 1.774$, $p < 0.05$) and product quality ($\beta = 0.153$, $t = 1.677$, $p < 0.05$) significantly influenced the purchase intention of Gen Z towards sustainable clothing. Thus, H2, H3 and H4 are supported. Cohen (1988) provided a guideline for interpreting the magnitude of f^2 , categorizing it into large effects (0.35), medium effects (0.15), and small effects (0.02). The f^2 results in this study, indicated that all relationships had effect sizes that ranged from 0.010 to 0.172, which are classified as small to medium. Although these effect sizes fall into small to moderate categories based on Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, within fiercely competitive retail industries even incremental improvements can result in significant gains when multiplied across millions of Gen Z shoppers. In other words, small shifts in

loyalty or perceptions of risk may not be behaviourally transformative when considered on an individual-level but the collective impact across a significant digital consumer base can tangibly empower sustainable fashion. This would imply that retailers should not ignore small coefficients and instead consider them part of an array of incremental levers that work in concert to mold long-term consumer response and competitive advantage.

Social media influence had a direct impact on the purchase intention. This is aligned to the results detected in research conducted in Pakistan (Husnain & Toor, 2017) and Indonesia (Pinto & Paramita, 2021) where social media marketing significantly influenced Gen Z choices. One reason may be that, in India at least, Gen Z consumers are more inclined to use social media for discovery purposes. This emphasizes the significance of taking cultural and market level dynamics into consideration when using global digital marketing learning.

This research has found that brand loyalty has a positive significant impact on the purchase intention of Gen Z towards sustainable fashion. This is in line with previous studies suggesting that loyalty drives repeat buying and develops brand commitment (Cagnin & Nicolas, 2022; Andhini & Andanawarih, 2022). Instead of traditional drivers, value for money or brand stories, evidence is growing that loyalty can be attributed to the digital service environment. As a whole, these findings support that in online sustainable fashion loyalty is not only emotional or attitudinal but also related to consumers' belief of risk ease and service continuity.

Risk perception has been extensively researched to be one of barriers to online transactions and technology-mediated exchanges. For instance, Chu et al. (2023) found that risk was one of the factors that significantly affected consumers' continued intention toward online grocery shopping and also Mohd et al. (2023) found risk perception as main predictor of Malaysians' intention to use facial recognition payment system. Taken as a whole, these findings highlight the general trend that risk attitudes commonly inhibit consumers' intent to adopt digital platforms in different contexts. For sustainable fashion however, product authenticity, sizing and returns uncertainty is likely to raise perceived risk and hence damping purchase intention among the Gen Z.

Also, the results prove that product quality plays a dominant role in the positive impact of Gen Z's purchase intention for sustainable fashion. This finding is in line with previous findings that suggest quality perceptions influence consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions across different domains (Chen et al., 2020; Mirabi et al., 2015; Yeo et al., 2022). Beyond product characteristics per se, service scientists argue that quality perceptions are embedded in the entire customer experience. Quality assessments based on digital signals such as sustainability certificates, precise product descriptions, and reliable reviews are factors moderating the impacts of brand attitude and purchase uncertainty toward their purchase intentions within sustainable fashion for Gen Z consumers.

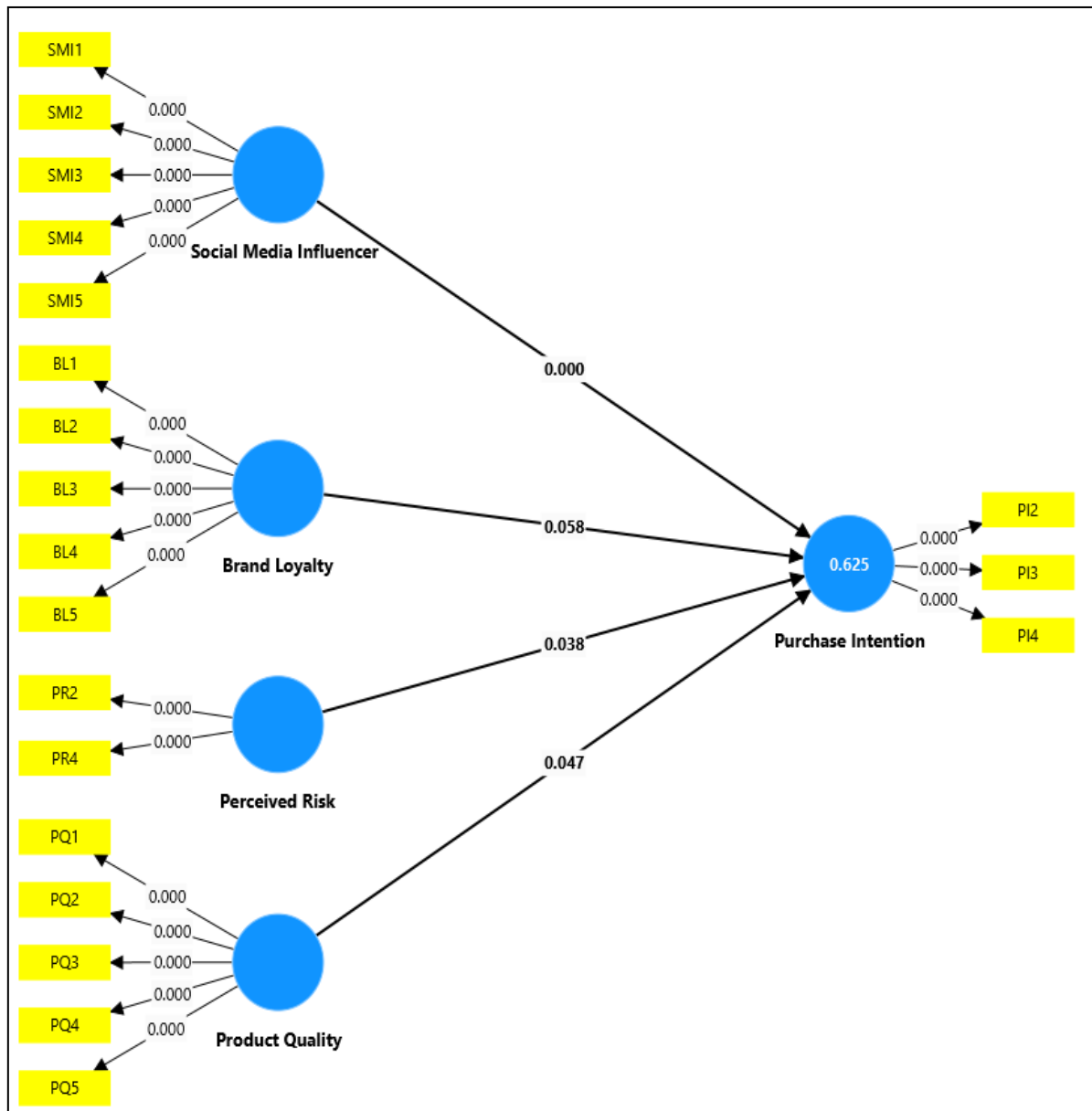


Fig.2: Results of structural modelling analysis

5. Conclusion

The current research explored the determinants of Gen Z's intention to buy sustainable fashion in India, namely social media influence, brand loyalty, perceived risk and product quality. Findings suggest that brand loyalty, perceived risk and product quality play a significant role in purchase intention but not social media. The findings of the paper contribute to dimensions of purchase intention scales which until now were not explored in sustainable fashion and India Gen Z consumer segment and fills the research gap for sustainability driven mass consumers in emerging markets.

One practical implication of our results is that for fashion retailers, actionable insights are delivered. Building brand loyalty by creating personalized communication and loyalty programs, reducing perceived risk through secure transactions and clear return policy as well as maintaining high quality of products are essential factors to promote sustainable consumption. Although social media had no significant impact on purchase intention, it is nonetheless a valuable tool for creating brand awareness and should therefore be considered in conjunction with the overall digital marketing strategy.

This study is not without limitations. Sample is restricted to Indian Gen Z respondents, who are predominately well educated and urban, thereby limiting generalisation. Additionally, self-reported data may be subject to bias. Some of the limitations such as country-specific result, lack of evidence on behavioural differences over time and causal inference could be addressed in future research using cross-country comparisons to account for cultural variations, longitudinal studies to witness the changes in behaviours behaviourally overtime, and experiment designs to examine the influence mechanism.

Placing Gen Z consumer behaviour in sustainable fashion context, this research demonstrates how loyalty, risk perception and product quality impact purchase intention. These findings have theoretical and managerial implications and provide a basis for the creation of focused strategies that underpin sustainable fashion retailing.

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