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ECO-LABELS AS TRUST SIGNALS: UNDERSTANDING PURCHASE INTENT AND LABEL LITERACY AMONG INDIAN GEN Z CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of eco-labels on the purchase intentions of Gen Z consumers in urban India, focusing on their role as trust-enhancing signals in the context of sustainable product choices. As environmental consciousness rises globally, brands are increasingly leveraging eco-labels to attract younger, sustainability-aware demographics. However, there exists a significant gap between the **presence of eco-labels** and **their actual impact on consumer behaviour**, particularly in the Indian Gen Z segment.

The research draws upon consumer behaviour frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and cue utilization theory to examine how Gen Z interprets, evaluates, and acts upon eco-labels during purchase decisions. A mixed-method approach is employed—combining structured surveys with in-depth interviews—to uncover both statistical patterns and deeper psychological drivers. Special emphasis is placed on **eco-label literacy** (understanding and trust) and how it moderates the relationship between environmental claims and actual buying behaviour.

By shedding light on the complex interplay between awareness, perception, and action, this study contributes to both academic discourse and brand strategy. It aims to guide marketers, policy makers, and sustainability advocates in designing more credible and engaging eco-communication that resonates with India's next-generation consumers.

KEYWORDS: Eco-Labels, Gen Z Consumers, Sustainable Marketing, Purchase Intent, Label Literacy, India, Consumer Behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, environmental concerns have significantly reshaped consumer behaviour, leading to a rising demand for sustainable products. One of the most widely adopted communication tools used

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by brands to signify sustainability is **eco-labelling**—symbols, logos, or certifications that inform consumers about a product's environmental or ethical attributes (Thøgersen, 2000). As sustainability moves from being a trend to a purchasing priority, particularly among younger consumers, **eco-labels** are emerging as powerful signals in shaping consumer trust and intention.

Among these emerging consumer groups, **Generation Z (Gen Z)**—those born between 1997 and 2012—stands out for its high environmental awareness, social activism, and digital fluency (Williams et al., 2012). In the Indian context, Gen Z constitutes a significant portion of the population with increasing purchasing power, making it crucial to understand how this group perceives and responds to sustainability signals such as eco-labels.

Theoretical frameworks such as the **Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)** offer valuable insights into how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence purchase intentions. When applied to eco-labels, this theory helps explain how beliefs about sustainability—amplified by label credibility—can shape intentions to buy eco-friendly products. Similarly, **Cue Utilization Theory (Olson & Jacoby, 1972)** supports the notion that consumers rely on external cues like packaging and certifications when product attributes are difficult to evaluate directly making eco-labels a critical heuristic in low-involvement or ethical purchases.

Despite the global growth of eco-conscious marketing, research suggests a **knowledge-attitude-behaviour gap**: although Gen Z consumers often express strong support for sustainability, this does not always translate into actual purchase behaviour (Young et al., 2010). In India, this disconnect is further compounded by **label illiteracy**, brand scepticism, and the lack of standardized eco-certifications that consumers trust and understand (D'Souza et al., 2020). Therefore, merely displaying an eco-label may not be enough to influence behaviour unless consumers recognize, trust, and relate to it.

Given these nuances, this study seeks to **explore the relationship between eco-label awareness, trust, and purchase intent among Gen Z consumers in India**. It also investigates the moderating role of label literacy—how well consumers understand what the labels mean—and its influence on intention-behaviour alignment. This research aims to bridge academic theory with practical implications for brands, policymakers, and sustainability communicators seeking to engage young Indian consumers more effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

1. Eco-Labels: Concept, Classification, and Significance

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Eco-labels serve as communicative tools that inform consumers about the environmental performance of products and services. They are designed to bridge the information gap between producers and consumers by providing standardized, verifiable, and easily recognizable indicators of sustainability (Thøgersen, 2000). Essentially, eco-labels act as **credence cues**—attributes that consumers cannot verify even after consumption but must trust based on certification credibility (Rex & Baumann, 2007). Their primary goal is to influence consumer decision-making toward environmentally friendly choices while encouraging producers to adopt sustainable practices.

Eco-labels are generally categorized into three main types as defined by the **International Organization for Standardization (ISO 14020 Series)**. **Type I** (ISO 14024) labels are third-party verified certifications, such as Energy Star or Eco mark, that evaluate multiple life-cycle criteria. **Type II** (ISO 14021) labels are self-declared claims made by manufacturers, often focusing on single attributes like recyclability or biodegradability. **Type III** (ISO 14025) labels provide quantified environmental data based on life cycle assessments (LCAs) and are verified by independent bodies (Testa et al., 2015).

The significance of eco-labels lies not only in promoting sustainable consumption but also in **building consumer trust**, improving market differentiation, and stimulating innovation in green production. When effectively communicated, eco-labels create both environmental and competitive advantages, serving as a bridge between **corporate responsibility and consumer awareness** (D'Souza et al., 2020).

2. Consumer Perception of Eco-Labels

Consumer perception of eco-labels plays a critical role in shaping sustainable purchasing behaviour. Eco-labels function as **informational shortcuts** that guide environmentally conscious consumers, but their influence largely depends on the **consumer's level of awareness, trust, and understanding** (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014). Research indicates that while a growing number of consumers are environmentally concerned, many still lack clarity about what different eco-labels signify, leading to **label confusion** or **label fatigue** (Ng et al., 2014).

A study by Gleim et al. (2013) found that consumers are more likely to trust eco-labels when they are issued by reputable third-party organizations rather than brands themselves. Trust, therefore, becomes a **mediating factor** between eco-label presence and purchase intention. Furthermore, **demographic factors** such as age, education level, and income also influence perception. For example, Gen Z and millennial consumers tend to value ethical and environmental attributes more than older consumers, yet their actual understanding of label content can be superficial (Young et al., 2010).

Another significant element is **label visibility and design clarity**—consumers are more responsive to

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eco-labels that are easily recognizable and clearly linked to environmental benefits. The credibility of the label and its communication style can directly impact whether consumers consider it during their purchase decision-making (Grunert et al., 2014).

Thus, while eco-labels have the potential to shift consumer behaviour toward sustainability, their impact is moderated by **cognitive engagement, trust, and comprehension**. Bridging this perceptual gap is key to making eco-labelling a more effective tool in promoting green consumerism.

3. Eco-Label Trust and Credibility

Trust and credibility are foundational to the effectiveness of eco-labels in influencing consumer purchase decisions. Without sufficient trust in the label's legitimacy and certification source, consumers are unlikely to perceive eco-labelled products as genuinely sustainable (Darnall et al., 2018). Trust is often built upon the **transparency, reliability, and third-party certification** of eco-labels. Labels backed by **independent or government-affiliated organizations** tend to generate more credibility compared to those issued by brands themselves, which may be perceived as self-serving (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014).

The credibility of an eco-label is enhanced when it is supported by **standardized criteria, verifiable audits, and clear communication** of what the label entails (Thøgersen et al., 2010). Research also shows that **misleading green claims**, or "greenwashing," can severely damage consumer trust in eco-labels as a category, not just for individual brands (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). When consumers doubt the authenticity of sustainability claims, they tend to become sceptical or indifferent toward all eco-labels.

Moreover, **label proliferation**—too many overlapping or competing eco-labels—can confuse consumers, reducing the perceived credibility of even legitimate labels (Moon, Costello, & Koo, 2017). For eco-labels to be trusted, they must not only deliver **accurate environmental claims** but also foster consumer confidence through consistent, verifiable, and easy-to-understand standards.

In essence, **trust acts as a gatekeeper** in the eco-label-consumer relationship. Without it, even the most well-designed labels fail to drive sustainable consumer behaviour.

4. Gen Z's Environmental Consciousness and Values

Generation Z, comprising individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012, has emerged as a socially and environmentally conscious cohort, deeply engaged with issues of climate change, sustainability, and ethical consumption. Numerous studies highlight that Gen Z consumers prioritize environmental impact in their decision-making processes more than previous generations (Fromm & Read, 2018).

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Their purchasing behaviour is often guided by **values such as authenticity, transparency, and ecological responsibility**, making them a critical demographic for brands using eco-labels.

Unlike older generations, Gen Z tends to **seek brands that align with their personal values**, often engaging in active research about a product's environmental footprint before making purchases (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This generation's high digital literacy further empowers them to call out greenwashing and advocate for genuine corporate social responsibility. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become tools for expressing their eco-conscious identities and influencing peer behaviour (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Importantly, Gen Z's **environmental activism** is not limited to consumer choices but extends to political and social arenas. They are more likely to support regulations, sustainability campaigns, and climate initiatives. Therefore, brands aiming to engage Gen Z through eco-labels must ensure not only the **credibility of their claims**, but also **meaningful environmental impact**, communicated clearly and honestly.

Understanding Gen Z's environmental values is crucial for designing marketing strategies that are **value-driven rather than purely transactional**, and for fostering long-term brand loyalty based on trust and shared purpose.

5. Purchase Intention and Actual Buying Behaviour

Purchase intention refers to a consumer's conscious plan to buy a particular product or service, while **actual buying behaviour** represents the final execution of that intention. Though intention is often considered a predictor of behaviour, numerous studies reveal a persistent **intention-behaviour gap**, especially in ethical or sustainable consumption (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). In the context of eco-labelled products, this gap is particularly noticeable among Gen Z consumers, who may express strong environmental concern yet fail to consistently act on it at the point of purchase (Johnstone & Tan, 2015).

Several psychological and situational factors influence the translation of green purchase intention into behaviour. **Price sensitivity, convenience, availability, brand familiarity**, and **peer influence** can override eco-conscious intentions, particularly when eco-labelled products are perceived as expensive or difficult to access (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). Additionally, **scepticism about green claims** or lack of trust in eco-labels can also deter actual buying behaviour despite stated intentions.

The **Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)** (Ajzen, 1991) is frequently used to understand this phenomenon. According to TPB, intention alone is not sufficient; perceived behavioural control and

subjective norms also play crucial roles. For Gen Z, whose values emphasize sustainability, the alignment of brand messaging, product performance, and peer validation becomes essential to close this gap.

Therefore, marketers and policymakers must not only **raise awareness** but also **reduce barriers to action** to ensure that strong green purchase intentions among Gen Z consumers translate into actual, consistent eco-friendly purchasing behaviour.

6. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) in Green Marketing

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), provides a robust psychological framework for understanding how consumers make decisions, particularly in contexts involving ethical and environmental considerations. In green marketing, TPB is widely applied to study eco-conscious consumer behaviour, including how eco-labels influence purchase decisions.

According to TPB, three main factors drive behavioural intention: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of eco-labelled products, attitude reflects the consumer's positive or negative evaluation of purchasing eco-friendly goods. For instance, if a Gen Z consumer believes eco-labelled products are beneficial for the environment and align with their personal values, the attitude is likely to be favourable (Paul et al., 2016).

Subjective norms refer to the social pressure perceived from peers, family, or influencers. Gen Z, being highly active on digital platforms, often aligns their behaviour with what is socially endorsed—making eco-labels more influential when they are associated with trendsetters or ethical influencers (Yadav & Pathak, 2016).

Perceived behavioural control denotes the consumer's belief in their capability to perform the behaviour, such as access to eco-products, affordability, or availability. If eco-labelled products are perceived as expensive or scarce, the intention may not translate into actual behaviour, despite favourable attitudes and norms.

TPB thus offers marketers insights to design campaigns that not only promote positive attitudes but also build social proof and reduce perceived barriers. By targeting all three constructs, green marketing efforts can more effectively drive sustainable consumption.

7. Cue Utilization Theory and Label Interpretation

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Cue Utilization Theory offers a valuable lens for understanding how consumers interpret and respond to **eco-labels** when making purchase decisions. According to Olson and Jacoby (1972), this theory posits that consumers rely on **intrinsic** and **extrinsic cues** to evaluate product quality, especially when they lack direct experience with the product. In the context of green marketing, **eco-labels serve as extrinsic cues** that signal environmental friendliness, ethical sourcing, or sustainable production.

When it comes to interpreting eco-labels, especially among **Gen Z consumers**, trustworthiness and clarity of the label play crucial roles. If the label is associated with a recognized certification body (like Energy Star, Fair Trade, or BIS-certified eco-labels in India), consumers are more likely to interpret the cue as a reliable indicator of product sustainability (Maheswaran & Sternthal, 1990). On the other hand, ambiguous, self-declared, or visually complex eco-labels may create confusion, leading to scepticism or rejection of the sustainability claim.

The **efficacy of cue utilization** also depends on the **consumer's prior knowledge, motivation, and involvement level**. Gen Z, known for digital savviness and high awareness of environmental issues, tends to decode these cues more critically. Research shows that **eco-labels with clear visuals, minimal jargon, and third-party verification** are interpreted more positively and lead to higher purchase intent (Sammer & Wüstenhagen, 2006).

Thus, effective **eco-label design** must focus not just on certification accuracy but also on the **cognitive ease of interpretation**, especially when targeting young, value-driven consumer segments like Gen Z.

8. Greenwashing and Its Impact on Eco-Label Effectiveness

Greenwashing, defined as the deceptive practice of conveying a false impression or providing misleading information about how a company's products are environmentally sound, significantly undermines the credibility of **eco-labels**. As eco-consciousness grows among consumers—especially **Gen Z**, who are more likely to support brands with genuine sustainability claims—the presence of greenwashing creates confusion and mistrust (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

When companies use vague or unverified environmental claims—such as "all-natural", "eco-friendly", or "sustainable" without third-party validation—it dilutes the power of authentic **eco-labels**. This misrepresentation not only erodes consumer trust in specific brands but also casts doubt on legitimate certifications. Consequently, even products with credible eco-labels may be scrutinized or ignored, as consumers become sceptical about the authenticity of all environmental claims (Chen & Chang, 2013).

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For Gen Z, who are digitally literate and often engage in **online activism and information-seeking**, the detection of greenwashing can lead to backlash, brand boycotts, and negative word-of-mouth. In contrast, companies that maintain transparency, undergo independent certifications, and communicate sustainability clearly and honestly, benefit from enhanced trust and stronger consumer loyalty (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

The presence of **greenwashing, therefore, acts as a significant barrier to the effectiveness of eco-labels**, especially in markets where regulatory oversight is weak. It emphasizes the need for **standardized labelling practices**, government regulation, and consumer education to protect the integrity of eco-marketing and support meaningful environmental change.

9. Label Literacy and Consumer Understanding

Label literacy refers to a consumer's ability to comprehend, interpret, and make informed decisions based on product labels—including **eco-labels**, which communicate a product's environmental benefits. In the context of sustainable consumption, label literacy plays a pivotal role in influencing **purchase intention**, particularly among **Gen Z consumers**, who are environmentally aware but often overwhelmed by complex and inconsistent label formats (Grunert & Wills, 2007).

Studies show that a lack of **standardized labelling frameworks**, excessive use of technical jargon, and poorly designed visuals hinder consumers' understanding of eco-labels (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014). Even when consumers are motivated to choose greener products, low label literacy can lead to confusion, misinterpretation, or scepticism, ultimately discouraging pro-environmental behaviour. This issue is especially critical in developing economies like India, where awareness of international eco-labels is limited, and educational gaps may further inhibit comprehension (Biswas & Roy, 2015).

Label literacy is also closely tied to **cue utilization theory**, which suggests that consumers use both intrinsic and extrinsic product cues—such as labels and certifications—to assess product quality. However, when these cues are not clearly understood or trusted, they fail to positively influence consumer behaviour (Olson & Jacoby, 1972). Improving label literacy through **consumer education, simplified design**, and **digital label authentication tools** can enhance the effectiveness of eco-labels and lead to more sustainable consumption patterns.

In sum, increasing label literacy is essential for enabling consumers to translate their **environmental intentions into action**, making it a critical area for marketers, policymakers, and educators seeking to promote sustainable behaviour among Gen Z.

10. Price Sensitivity and Trade-offs in Green Purchases

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Price sensitivity refers to the degree to which the price of a product influences a consumer's purchasing decision. In the context of green marketing and eco-labelled products, price remains a significant barrier despite growing environmental awareness, especially among **Gen Z consumers** who often operate within limited disposable incomes (Young et al., 2010). While many consumers express a willingness to support sustainable practices, they are often reluctant to pay a premium unless they perceive a clear **value proposition**, such as superior quality, health benefits, or long-term cost savings (Magnier & Schoormans, 2015).

Eco-labelled products tend to be priced higher due to sustainable sourcing, ethical labour, and certification costs. However, this "green premium" may deter consumers when they are forced to make trade-offs between **environmental values and economic practicality** (D'Souza et al., 2007). The **attitude-behaviour gap**—where consumers hold positive environmental attitudes but fail to act on them—frequently emerges in such pricing contexts (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006).

Furthermore, when eco-labels are not clearly communicated or when **greenwashing** is suspected, consumers become more sceptical about whether the higher price is justified (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). For Gen Z, although sustainability is a core value, affordability often dictates choices, particularly in price-sensitive markets like India. Thus, marketers must strike a balance by offering credible eco-labels, **affordable options**, or innovative models like **subscription services, refill packs**, or **loyalty incentives** to minimize the trade-off.

Understanding the interplay between price sensitivity and green purchase intentions is essential for building successful eco-product strategies that are both **ethically resonant** and **commercially viable**.

11. Cultural and Regional Influences on Sustainable Buying in India

Sustainable buying behaviour in India is shaped by a complex interplay of **cultural values**, **regional disparities**, and **socio-economic factors**. While the global discourse on eco-labels and green products often assumes a universal consumer mindset, India presents a fragmented landscape where **tradition, religion, economic diversity, and access** significantly influence purchasing decisions (Gupta & Ogden, 2009).

Culturally, Indian consumers tend to value frugality and minimalism, which historically align with sustainable consumption practices—such as reuse, repair, and home remedies. However, with rising **urbanization and Western influence**, there has been a shift towards convenience-based consumption, particularly among the younger Gen Z demographic. Yet, **religious and spiritual frameworks**, such as *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Mission), have reignited interest in eco-conscious living in many regions (Rao & Thakur, 2020).

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Regionally, sustainable product uptake varies. **Urban centres** like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore show higher awareness and adoption of eco-labelled products due to better access, income levels, and exposure to sustainability narratives (Chatterjee & Das, 2021). In contrast, **rural and tier-2/tier-3 cities** often prioritize price and availability over environmental credentials. Moreover, **language barriers** and lack of localized eco-label information reduce the effectiveness of green marketing in many non-English speaking regions.

Family influence, collectivist mindsets, and community norms also guide buying behaviour in India. Gen Z individuals, though exposed to global sustainability trends, often **balance modern values with traditional expectations**, creating a nuanced purchasing approach.

To foster sustainable buying, marketers must consider **localized campaigns**, **multi-lingual eco-labels**, and culturally resonant narratives. One-size-fits-all strategies often fail in a country as diverse as India, underscoring the importance of **regional and cultural contextualization** in green marketing efforts.

12. Marketing Communication of Eco-Labels and Sustainability

Marketing communication plays a crucial role in shaping consumer awareness and interpretation of eco-labels, which in turn influences sustainable purchase decisions. For eco-labels to be effective, they must be integrated into a brand's broader **sustainability communication strategy** with clarity, consistency, and credibility (Leonidou et al., 2013). This is particularly important when targeting Gen Z consumers in India, who are tech-savvy, highly exposed to digital media, and often sceptical of vague or superficial green claims.

Effective communication of eco-labels involves not only **label visibility** on packaging but also **educational content** through social media, advertisements, influencer partnerships, and in-store promotions. Studies show that when sustainability claims are **supported by factual, transparent, and relatable messaging**, consumer trust increases, leading to higher purchase intention (Rahbar & Wahid, 2011).

In the Indian context, **language diversity**, **varying levels of environmental awareness**, and **trust deficits** make it essential for brands to localize their messaging. Using regional languages, culturally resonant imagery, and credible third-party endorsements (e.g., BIS, FSSAI, or internationally recognized certifiers like USDA Organic or Fairtrade) enhances the perceived authenticity of eco-labels (Joshi & Rahman, 2015).

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Moreover, **interactive and visual storytelling formats** such as short videos, reels, and infographics can break down complex environmental information into digestible formats for Gen Z consumers. Emotional appeals that connect sustainability to personal values (like health, community welfare, or patriotism) are also highly effective.

However, the challenge lies in **avoiding greenwashing**—the use of misleading sustainability claims without substantial proof. Clear communication of **what the eco-label certifies**, how it is monitored, and how it benefits the environment is essential to maintain credibility and consumer loyalty.

13. Influence of Social Media and Influencers on Eco-Friendly Choices

Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping eco-conscious consumer behaviour, particularly among Gen Z, who are digital natives and highly active on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Influencers—especially those focused on sustainability and lifestyle—act as **opinion leaders** whose endorsements significantly impact consumer perceptions and eco-friendly decision-making (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

In the Indian context, influencers such as sustainable fashion bloggers and zero-waste advocates have made eco-conscious living more relatable and aspirational for young consumers. Research by Lim et al. (2022) found that **perceived authenticity and relatability of influencers** enhance message credibility, increasing the likelihood of adopting sustainable behaviours, including choosing eco-labelled products.

Moreover, **visual content, stories, and product hauls** shared online serve as modern-day word-of-mouth marketing. They help bridge the knowledge gap about eco-labels by explaining certifications, green benefits, and usage. According to Jain and Rana (2021), social media exposure significantly increases environmental awareness and willingness to pay for green products among Indian youth.

However, not all influence is positive. The rise of **greenwashing influencers**—those who superficially endorse eco-friendly lifestyles without real commitment—can create confusion and mistrust among followers (De Veirman et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of **transparency and informed collaborations** between brands and influencers to foster genuine eco-friendly choices.

Ultimately, social media and influencers act as **critical catalysts** in amplifying sustainability messages and guiding Gen Z's purchase decisions. Their power lies not just in promoting eco-labelled products but in cultivating a value-driven lifestyle that encourages responsible consumption.

14. Eco-Label Adoption by Brands in Indian FMCG and Fashion Sector

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The adoption of eco-labels by brands in the Indian Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and fashion sectors reflects a growing responsiveness to sustainability concerns, especially amid rising environmental awareness among Gen Z consumers. Eco-labels serve as third-party certifications that validate a product's ecological or ethical standards, such as reduced carbon footprint, biodegradability, cruelty-free status, or use of organic materials (Delmas & Grant, 2014).

In the **FMCG sector**, companies like Hindustan Unilever and ITC have begun incorporating eco-labels such as "Rainforest Alliance Certified" or "Green Pro" on select product lines to align with consumer demand for environmentally responsible goods (Confederation of Indian Industry [CII], 2023). Packaging innovations and labelling around recyclability, plastic neutrality, and cruelty-free testing are often used as differentiators in a highly competitive market.

Similarly, in the **Indian fashion industry**, sustainable fashion startups and major brands alike have started integrating eco-labels like **GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard)** and **Fairtrade** to enhance transparency and gain trust. Brands such as Fab India and No Nasties actively use eco-labels to appeal to eco-conscious urban youth. The rise of *slow fashion* in contrast to *fast fashion* is further accelerating this transition (Chaturvedi & Singh, 2022).

However, challenges remain. Many brands use **self-declared green claims** without third-party verification, raising concerns over greenwashing. Moreover, the lack of standardization across labels and limited consumer awareness dilutes the effectiveness of these labels (Banga, 2013). Small and medium enterprises also find certification costs prohibitive, limiting widespread adoption.

Nevertheless, with increasing regulatory push and consumer demand, eco-labelling in India is poised for expansion. The incorporation of these labels offers brands not only **market differentiation** but also a **strategic avenue to build credibility and loyalty** among the environmentally aware Gen Z segment.

15. Policy and Regulatory Framework Governing Eco-Labels in India

India's policy and regulatory framework for eco-labels is evolving in response to the country's growing environmental concerns and global sustainability commitments. Eco-labels are voluntary or mandatory environmental certifications that guide consumers toward environmentally responsible products and encourage industries to adopt sustainable practices. However, the regulatory environment in India is still developing and fragmented.

The **Eco mark Scheme**, introduced in 1991 by the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** in collaboration with the **Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)**, was the first

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official attempt to provide eco-labels in India. It certifies products across 17 categories, including soaps, packaging materials, paints, and clothing. However, despite its early start, the adoption of Eco mark has been minimal due to limited public awareness, lack of enforcement, and insufficient incentives for manufacturers (MoEFCC, 2023).

To bridge these gaps, India has more recently introduced **Green Pro Certification**, spearheaded by the **Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)**. This eco-label is tailored for building materials and FMCG products and is gaining traction due to better industry participation and third-party validation. Moreover, the **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)** has introduced front-of-pack labelling regulations that promote "green" food choices, especially for Gen Z consumers who prioritize health and sustainability (FSSAI, 2022).

In the textile and fashion sector, although there is no central Indian eco-labelling body, Indian exporters often adopt **global eco-labels** such as **OEKO-TEX**, **GOTS**, or **Fairtrade**, to comply with international market expectations. The government's **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)** and **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** under the Plastic Waste Management Rules 2016 also indirectly encourage the adoption of eco-labelling practices.

However, there is currently **no unified national policy** that governs eco-labelling across all sectors. The lack of harmonization between various eco-labels, absence of a centralized certification authority, and poor consumer awareness pose significant challenges to the widespread implementation and effectiveness of eco-labels in India (Jain & Bansal, 2021).

A more robust policy environment with **standardized labelling norms**, **government-supported incentives**, and **consumer education campaigns** is necessary to strengthen eco-label governance in India and encourage responsible consumption.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite a growing body of literature on eco-labels, green marketing, and sustainable consumption, several critical gaps persist in the context of Indian Gen Z consumers:

1. **Limited India-Specific Research on Gen Z:**
   While numerous studies have explored eco-labels and green buying behavior globally (e.g., Young et al., 2010; D'Souza et al., 2020), few have specifically examined how *Indian* Gen Z consumers—who are digitally native and environmentally conscious—perceive and respond to eco-labels in everyday purchases, particularly in the FMCG and fashion sectors.

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2. **Insufficient Focus on Eco-Label Literacy:**
   Prior research acknowledges label confusion and misinterpretation (Grunert et al., 2014; Thøgersen, 2000), yet there is a lack of empirical work quantifying the actual *label literacy*—i.e., the ability to understand, trust, and use eco-labels effectively—among young Indian consumers.
3. **Gap Between Green Intentions and Actions:**
   Studies such as Carrington et al. (2010) and Johnstone & Tan (2015) highlight a persistent *attitude-behavior gap* in green consumption, but this phenomenon remains under-investigated in the Indian Gen Z demographic, especially in the context of eco-labels acting as decision cues.
4. **Under-Explored Role of Trust Signals in Label Effectiveness:**
   Although trust and credibility of labels have been discussed (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Testa et al., 2015), few studies have examined *eco-labels as trust signals* from a branding and psychological cue utilization perspective in India's sustainability-conscious Gen Z population.
5. **Lack of Theory-Driven Empirical Studies:**
   There is limited application of integrated consumer behavior models such as the **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)** and **Cue Utilization Theory** to systematically understand the eco-label–purchase intention relationship in the Indian context.
6. **Digital and Social Media Influence Overlooked:**
   With Gen Z's heavy reliance on digital platforms, the *mediating role of influencers, social media content*, and peer reviews on the credibility and adoption of eco-labels remains relatively unaddressed in the Indian market.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To examine the level of eco-label literacy among Indian Gen Z consumers and its influence on their ability to interpret and trust sustainability claims.
2. To analyze the relationship between eco-label credibility, perceived environmental value, and purchase intention within the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework.
3. To investigate the moderating role of digital influence—such as social media and online reviews—on the trust and adoption of eco-labeled FMCG and fashion products by Gen Z consumers in India.

DATA ANALYSIS:

1. Age Group

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Table 1.1: Age Group

Age Group	Percentage
Below 18	9.5%
18–21	77%
22–25	10.8%
26–30	1.4%
Above 30	1.3%

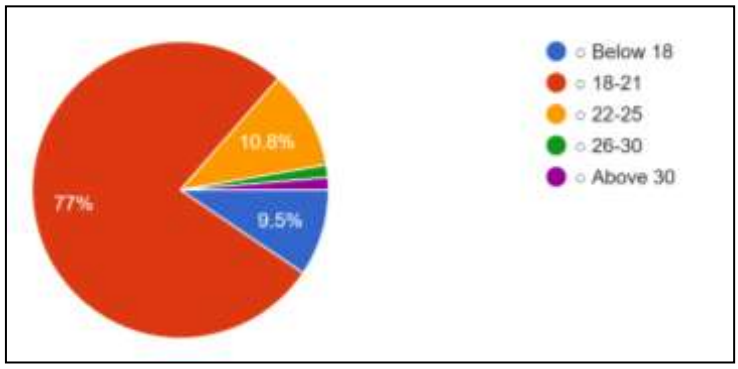

Figure 1.1

Data Interpretation: Most respondents (77%) are aged 18–21, representing the core Gen Z segment targeted in this study.

This group is digitally active, making them ideal for assessing eco-label literacy and trust in sustainability claims.

The age distribution supports the study's objectives by focusing on how digital influence and eco-label credibility shape Gen Z's purchase intentions.

2. Occupation:

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Table 1.2: Occupation

Occupation	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Student	87.8%	65
Employed	8%	6
Self-employed	3%	2
Unemployed	1%	1

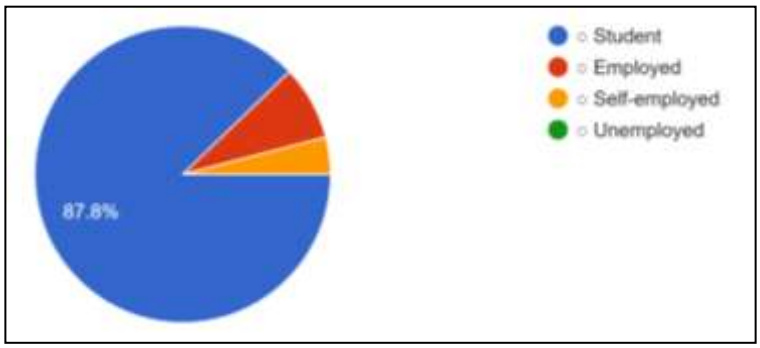

Figure 1.2

Data Interpretation: Most respondents (87.8%) are students, reflecting the core Gen Z audience that is still in the learning and awareness-building stage.

Their responses provide insights into how eco-label knowledge and trust develop before full market participation as independent consumers.

The dominance of students highlights the importance of digital media and education in shaping eco-conscious attitudes and purchase intentions within this demographic.

3. Type of city/ town you live in?

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Table 1.3: Type of city/ town you live in

Type of City/Town	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Metro	50%	37
Urban	32.4%	24
Semi-urban	12.2%	9
Rural	5.4%	4

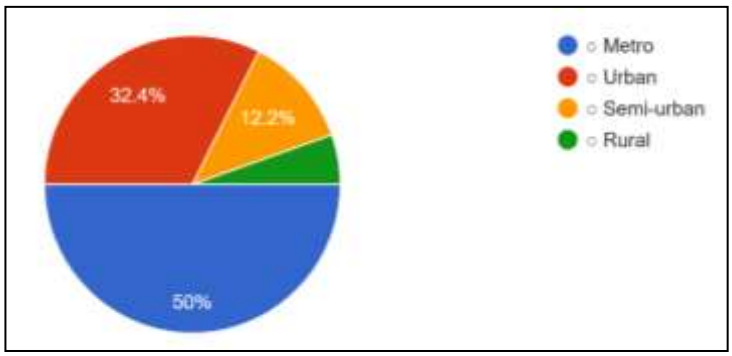

Figure 1.3

Data Interpretation: Half of the respondents (50%) reside in metro cities, followed by 32.4% from urban areas, indicating strong representation from digitally connected regions.

This urban-majority sample suggests greater exposure to sustainable brands and eco-label marketing through online platforms.

Limited participation from semi-urban and rural areas (17.6%) reflects a potential awareness gap in eco-label literacy beyond major cities.

4. Have you ever noticed eco-labels (e.g., “FSC’, GreenPro” , ‘Energy Star’) on product packaging?

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Table 1.4: Eco-labels (e.g., "FSC', GreenPro" , 'Energy Star') on product packaging

Response Option	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Yes	60.8%	45
No	21.6%	16
Not sure	17.6%	13

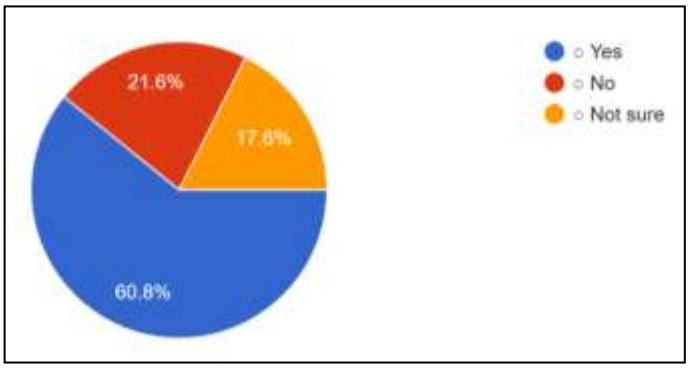

Figure 1.4

Data Interpretation: A majority (60.8%) of respondents have noticed eco-labels on product packaging, showing a moderate level of awareness among Gen Z consumers.

The 21.6% who have not noticed and 17.6% who are unsure indicate that eco-label visibility and communication still need strengthening. This finding supports the study's focus on improving eco-label literacy and credibility to enhance trust and purchase intent among young consumers.

5. How confident are you in understanding what an eco-label means when you see one?

Table 1.5: Understanding of eco-labels

Confidence Level	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)

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Very confident	13.5%	10
Somewhat confident	37.8%	28
Neutral	36.5%	27
Not very confident	8.1%	6
Not at all confident	4.1%	3

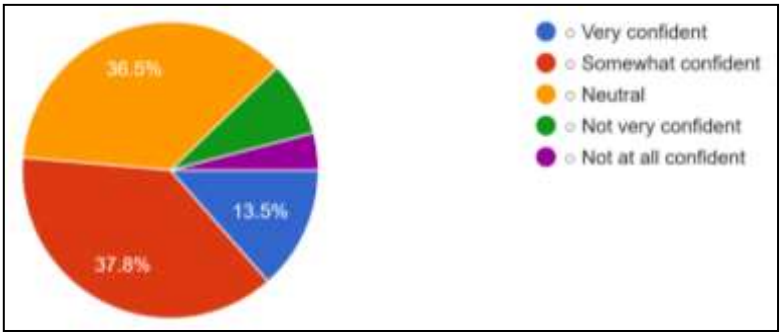

Figure 1.5

Data Interpretation: Most respondents are either somewhat confident (37.8%) or neutral (36.5%), indicating partial understanding of eco-label meanings.
Only 13.5% feel very confident, suggesting that eco-label literacy among Gen Z is still developing.

The moderate confidence levels highlight the need for clearer communication and credible labelling to strengthen trust and informed purchase decisions.

6. Which statement best describes your understanding of eco-labels?

Table 1.6: Statement best describes your understanding of eco labels

Statement Option	**Percentage**	**Number of Responses (out of 74)**
They guarantee environmental friendliness	40.5%	30
They indicate some sustainable practices	37.8%	28
They are just marketing symbols	13.5%	10
I don't know what they	8.1%	6

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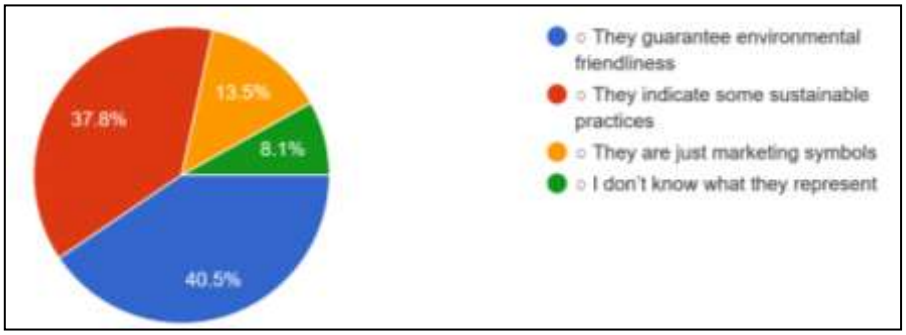

Figure 1.6

Data Interpretation:
A large share (40.5%) believes eco-labels guarantee environmental friendliness, while 37.8% view them as indicators of sustainable practices.

Around 21.6% either see them as marketing symbols or don't understand their meaning, revealing partial misconceptions.

This mix of accurate and mistaken perceptions highlights the need to enhance eco-label literacy to build consumer trust and credibility in sustainability claims.

7. Have you ever used an eco-label to decide between two similar products?

Table 1.7: Usage of an eco-label to decide between two similar products

Response Option	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Yes, often	12.2%	9
Occasionally	37.8%	28
Rarely	31.1%	23
Never	18.9%	14

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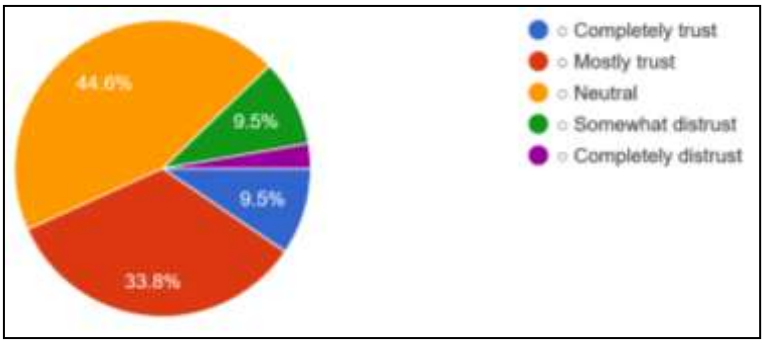

Figure 1.7

Data Interpretation: Nearly half of respondents (50%), combining "often" and "occasionally," rely on eco-labels as a differentiating factor when comparing similar products.

31.1% rarely and 18.9% never consider them, showing that eco-label influence exists but is not yet habitual in Gen Z's buying process.

This suggests that enhancing eco-label clarity, credibility, and digital visibility can further strengthen their role as trust-based purchase cues among young consumers.

8. How likely are you to pay a slightly higher price for a product with an eco-label?

Table 1.8: How likely are you to pay a slightly higher price for a product with an eco-label

Likelihood Level	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Very likely	12.2%	9
Somewhat likely	40.5%	30
Neutral	32.4%	24
Unlikely	9.5%	7
Very unlikely	5.4%	4

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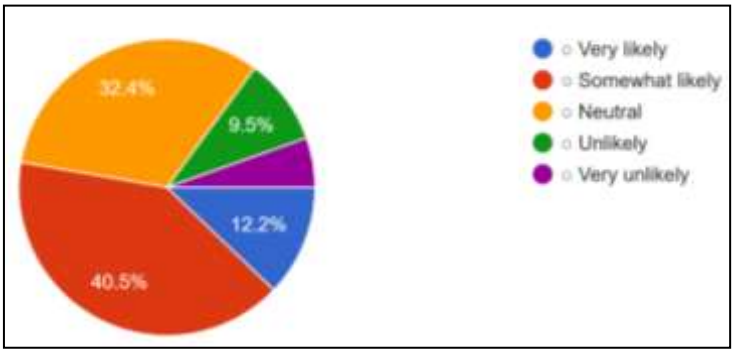

Figure 1.8

Data Interpretation: Over half of the respondents (52.7%, combining "very likely" and "somewhat likely") show a positive willingness to pay more for eco-labeled products, reflecting growing value-based purchasing behavior.
32.4% remain neutral, suggesting that while sustainability appeals to them, price sensitivity still influences decisions.

The results indicate that trust in eco-label credibility can justify premium pricing, supporting the TPB framework where attitude and perceived value drive purchase intent.

9. Which of the following product categories have you purchased with an eco-label?

Table 1.9: Product categories that you have purchased with an eco-label

Product Category	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Fashion / Clothing	18.9%	14
Food & Beverages	29.7%	22
Electronics	10.8%	8
Personal Care / Cosmetics	16.2%	12
Home / Kitchen	4.1%	3
I don't remember seeing one	20.3%	15

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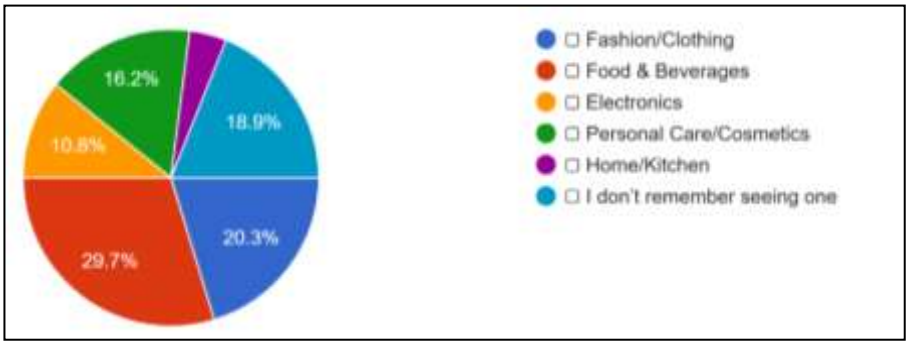

Data Interpretation: Food & Beverages (29.7%) lead as the most purchased category with eco-labels, followed by Fashion/Clothing (18.9%) and Personal Care (16.2%), showing Gen Z's preference for everyday consumables and lifestyle products.

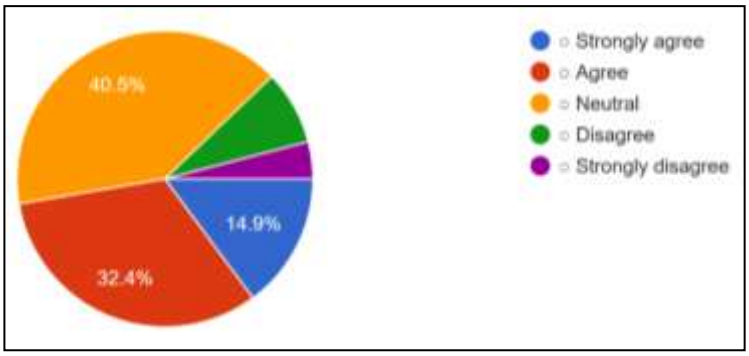

Figure 1.9

Lower responses in Electronics (10.8%) and Home/Kitchen (4.1%) indicate limited visibility or awareness of eco-labels in these segments.

The 20.3% who don't recall seeing eco-labels highlight the need for greater standardization and visibility of sustainability labels across all product categories.

10. To what extend do you agree: "Eco-labels influence my buying decision more than brand name or discounts."

Table 1.10: Eco-labels influence my buying decision more than brand name or discounts.

Response Option	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Strongly agree	14.9%	11
Agree	32.4%	24

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Neutral	40.5%	30
Disagree	8.1%	6
Strongly disagree	4.1%	3

Data Interpretation: Nearly 47.3% of respondents (agree and strongly agree) state that eco-labels influence their purchase decisions more than brand names or discounts, indicating a shift toward value-driven consumption.

A large share (40.5%) remains neutral, suggesting that traditional motivators like price and brand familiarity still hold importance.
The results imply that while eco-labels are emerging as strong trust signals, their influence can be amplified through credibility, education, and consistent digital communication.

11. When you see an eco-label product, what do you associate it with the most?

Table 1.11: When you see an eco-label product, what do you associate it with the most

Association Type	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Quality assurance	20.3%	15
Environmental safety	47.3%	35
Brand image	16.2%	12
Guilt-free buying	9.5%	7
I don't associate it with anything	6.7%	5

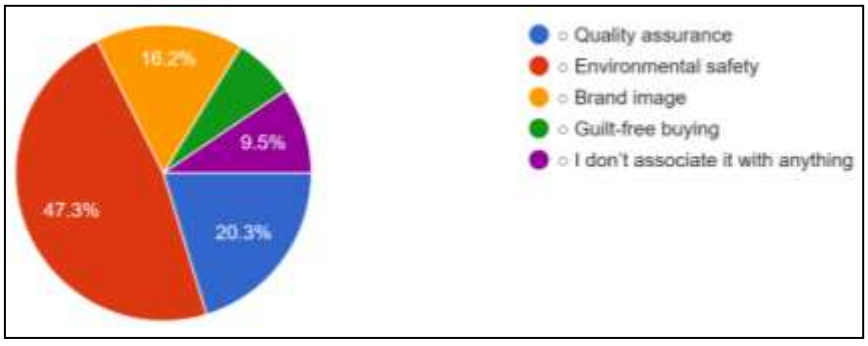

Figure 1.11

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Data Interpretation: Almost half (47.3%) of respondents associate eco-labeled products with environmental safety, showing strong alignment with sustainability-driven values among Gen Z.

Quality assurance (20.3%) and brand image (16.2%) also emerge as key associations, indicating that eco-labels enhance trust and perceived credibility of products.

A smaller segment (16.2% combined) views eco-labels as guilt-free or non-associative, highlighting a need for clearer messaging to deepen emotional and informational connections with consumers.

12. Where do you mostly come across information about eco-friendly or sustainable products?

Table 1.12: Where do you mostly come across information about eco-friendly or sustainable products

Source of Information	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Social media platforms	45.9%	34
Brand websites	12.2%	9
Online reviews	18.9%	14
YouTube / Influencer content	20.3%	15
News or articles	2.7%	2

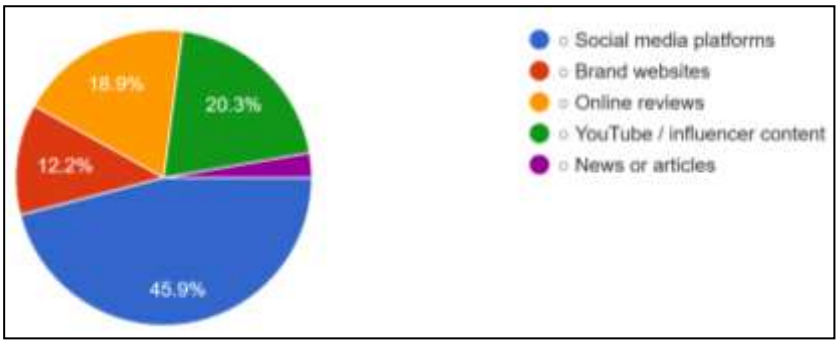

Figure 1.12

Data Interpretation: Social media (45.9%) is the leading source of exposure, reflecting Gen Z's heavy reliance on digital platforms for sustainability-related information.

YouTube and influencer content (20.3%) and online reviews (18.9%) further emphasize the influence

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of peer-generated and visual content on eco-label awareness.

Minimal dependence on brand websites (12.2%) and news/articles (2.7%) show that digital communities and influencers play a more dominant role in shaping eco-conscious perceptions.

13. To what extend do social media influencers impact your trust in eco-labelled products?

Table 1.13: To what extend do social media influencers impact your trust in eco-labelled products?

Level of Influence	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Very highly	14.9%	11
Moderately	52.7%	39
Slightly	25.7%	19
Not at all	6.7%	5

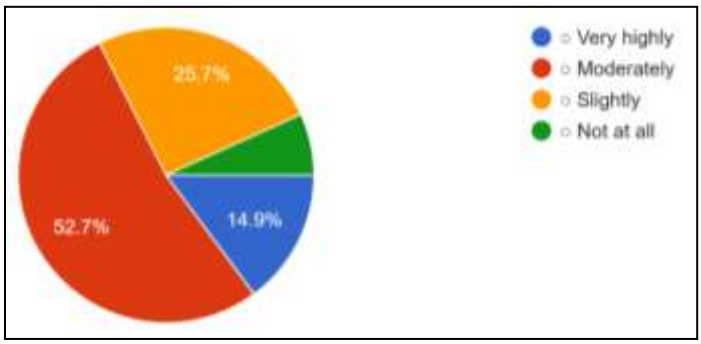

Figure 1.13

Data Interpretation: Over half of the respondents (52.7%) feel moderately influenced by social media influencers, showing that influencers play a substantial role in shaping eco-label trust.

About 40.6% (very high + slight influence) reflect varying levels of influence, suggesting that content authenticity and influencer credibility affect how Gen Z perceives eco-label claims.

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A small segment (6.7%) remains unaffected, indicating that some consumers rely more on personal research or independent judgment rather than influencer-driven messaging.

14. Have you ever bought an eco-labelled product based on a recommendation from an influencer or You tuber?

Table 1.14: Have you ever bought an eco-labelled product based on a recommendation from an influencer or You-tuber?

Response Option	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Yes	39.2%	29
No	35.1%	26
I'm not sure	25.7%	19

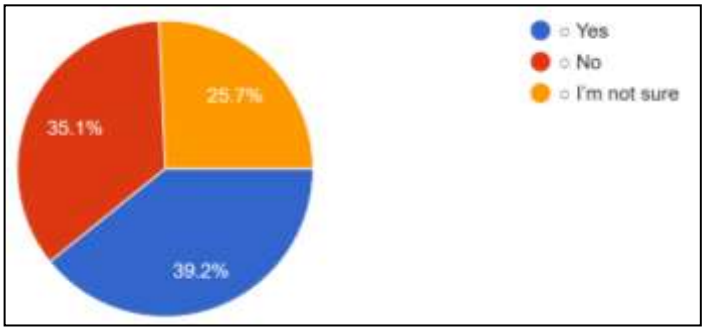

Figure 1.14

Data Interpretation: Around 39.2% of respondents have purchased eco-labeled products based on influencer or YouTuber recommendations, reflecting the growing impact of digital endorsements on Gen Z's buying choices.

35.1% have not acted on such recommendations, while 25.7% remain unsure, indicating mixed levels of trust and persuasion toward influencer content. These results highlight that authenticity,

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transparency, and perceived expertise of influencers significantly shape consumer trust and purchase intent for eco-labeled products.

15. Have you ever used an eco-label to decide between two similar products?

Table 1.15: Have you ever used an eco-label to decide between two similar products?

Response Option	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Yes, often	12.2%	9
Occasionally	37.8%	28
Rarely	31.1%	23
Never	18.9%	14

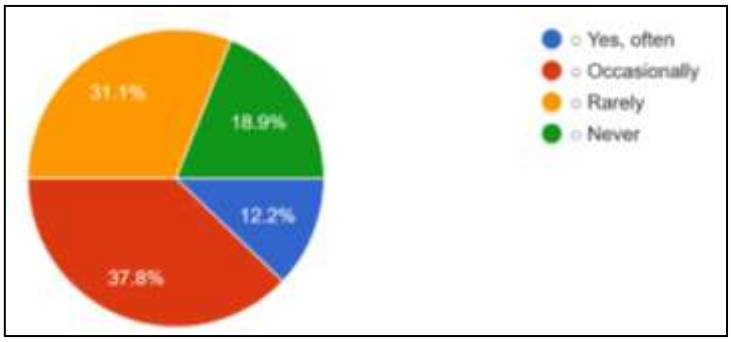

Figure 1.15

Data Interpretation: Nearly half of the respondents (50%), combining "often" and "occasionally," rely on eco-labels to differentiate between similar products, showing growing eco-conscious decision-making among Gen Z.

31.1% rarely and 18.9% never consider eco-labels, indicating that while awareness exists, consistent application remains limited.This pattern reinforces that enhancing eco-label credibility and visibility can further strengthen their role as trust-based cues influencing purchase intent.

16. Do you check online reviews for claims made on eco-label before making a purchase?

Table 1.16: Do you check online reviews for claims made on eco-label before making a purchase?

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Response Option	Percentage	Number of Responses (out of 74)
Always	27%	20
Often	23%	17
Sometimes	25.7%	19
Rarely	13.5%	10
Never	10.8%	8

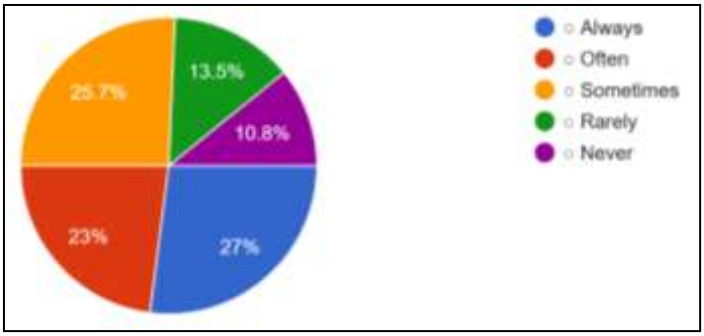

Figure 1.16

Data Interpretation: A significant portion (50%, combining "always" and "often") verify eco-label claims through online reviews, showing high digital literacy and critical evaluation among Gen Z consumers.

25.7% do so sometimes, suggesting a moderate but situational approach to verifying sustainability information.

The smaller group (24.3%, rarely or never) indicates that while digital influence shapes trust, not all consumers consistently cross-check eco-label authenticity before purchase.

CONCLUSION:

The study highlights that Indian Gen Z consumers demonstrate growing awareness and interest in eco-labels, though their understanding and consistent application in purchase decisions remain developing. Most respondents belong to the 18–21 age group, primarily students from urban and metro regions, representing a digitally active and sustainability-aware demographic.

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Findings show that while 60.8% of participants recognize eco-labels, only a small proportion are very confident in interpreting them. Many still associate eco-labels with environmental safety and quality assurance, though some misconceptions persist. This indicates partial eco-label literacy, suggesting that consumers can identify eco-labels but not always accurately decode their meaning.

The study further reveals that eco-label credibility significantly impacts purchase intent, with over half of respondents willing to pay a premium for eco-labelled products. However, neutrality in responses toward eco-label influence over brand or discounts suggests that price sensitivity and brand familiarity still compete with sustainability considerations.

Digital influence plays a crucial moderating role. Social media platforms, influencers, and online reviews are the primary sources shaping eco-label awareness and trust. A large portion of respondents rely on influencer recommendations and peer reviews before making eco-friendly purchases, validating the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)—where attitudes, perceived credibility, and social norms collectively drive purchase intentions.

Overall, the research concludes that eco-labels are emerging as effective trust signals among Gen Z consumers in India. Yet, education, authenticity, and digital transparency remain essential to translate awareness into sustained, trust-based, and behaviourally consistent green purchasing.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Enhance Eco-Label Literacy: Government bodies, NGOs, and brands should launch consumer education campaigns explaining the meaning, verification, and credibility of eco-labels through digital platforms and academic collaborations.
2. Improve Label Visibility and Standardization: Establish uniform eco-label frameworks across industries (FMCG, fashion, electronics) to avoid confusion and ensure consistent recognition among consumers.
3. Leverage Digital Influence Strategically: Collaborate with authentic, sustainability-focused influencers and encourage transparent communication to strengthen consumer trust and counter greenwashing.
4. Strengthen Brand Communication: Brands should integrate clear sustainability narratives on packaging and digital platforms, emphasizing both environmental impact and authenticity to enhance eco-label credibility.
5. Incentivize Sustainable Choices: Introduce reward-based programs (discounts, loyalty points, digital badges) for eco-friendly purchases to make sustainability financially appealing for price-sensitive Gen Z consumers.

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6. Promote Institutional and Policy Support: Policymakers should reinforce regulatory mechanisms ensuring that eco-labels meet verified standards, protecting consumers from false or misleading sustainability claims.

FUTURE SCOPE:

1. Broader Demographic Exploration: Future research can expand beyond the Gen Z cohort to include millennial and Gen Alpha consumers, enabling cross-generational comparisons in eco-label awareness, trust, and behaviour.
2. Experimental and Behavioural Studies: Subsequent studies could employ neuromarketing, eye-tracking, or behavioural-intention experiments to examine how eco-label placement, colour, or certification type influence subconscious purchase decisions.
3. Category-Specific Insights: Further research may focus on specific sectors—such as fashion, FMCG, or electronics—to identify how product involvement levels affect eco-label credibility and willingness to pay.
4. Longitudinal and Regional Analysis: Conducting long-term or region-wise studies across metro, urban, and rural markets could reveal evolving patterns in eco-label literacy and the diffusion of sustainability awareness in India.
5. Integration with Digital Ecosystems: Future studies can explore the role of AI-driven recommendations, e-commerce design cues, and social-media algorithms in amplifying or distorting perceptions of eco-labels.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

1. Bridging Knowledge Gaps: This study fills a crucial void in Indian consumer research by mapping eco-label literacy within the Gen Z population, a segment that will dominate future consumption and shape sustainability norms.
2. Practical Implications for Marketers: The findings help brands and policymakers design credible, visually effective, and easily interpretable eco-labels, reinforcing trust and purchase intent through authenticity and transparency.
3. Guidance for Policymakers and Educators: Insights from the study can support policy frameworks, sustainability curricula, and digital awareness campaigns aimed at strengthening consumer understanding of certified eco-labels.
4. Contribution to Behavioural Theory: By applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), this study demonstrates how attitude, perceived credibility, and social influence jointly drive sustainable purchasing—offering a foundation for future behavioural and marketing models.

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