ANALYZING THE BEHAVIORAL CORRELATES OF GUILT-FREE FOOD CONSUMPTION: STUDY OF GEN Z PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors influencing Gen Z's purchase intentions for guilt-free food products in India. The aim of the study is to examine the relationship of food habits among the current generation using the Theory of Planned behaviour. Using purposive sampling, the data was collected from 318 Gen Z students in major Indian cities. SPSS and AMOS were utilised to conduct the analysis of the sample. The analysis revealed that attitude, perceived behaviour control and subjective norms significantly influenced the purchase behaviour. The study provides valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and food producers seeking to promote guilt-free food products among this influential demographic.

Keywords: Gen Z, Guilt-Free Food, Purchase Intention, Subjective Norms, Perceived Behavioural Control, Food Neophobia

1. INTRODUCTION

There is an increased amount of research being conducted on Genz and their food habits in India. It is because they represent four hundred and seventy-two million people which accounts for over one third of the population (Khubchandani & Raman, 2025). Gen Z's food habits are strongly influenced by environmental responsibilities and consciousness as compared to other generations (Ruzgys & Pickering, 2024). Gen Z focuses more on positive food experiences, leading to a demand for reliable and transparent food sources (Zuo et al., 2022). The current Genz priorities more on the eating habits and often struggle with issues of body consciousness and self-esteem, bodily issues (Kaylor, et al., 2022). The research consistently shows a strong link between feelings of guilt/anxiety about food and eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. This highlights the importance of addressing emotional and psychological factors in the treatment of these disorders.

Women consistently report higher levels of food-related guilt than men. This suggests that societal pressures and gender roles may play a significant role in shaping women's relationship with food. All of these psychological factors further motivate the generation to either diet or seek food that can gratify them without impacting their health.

Based on these expectations, a new concept of diet called guilt-free food is emerging in the current era. The main objective of guilt-free food products is to offer emotional relief, as Gen Z, after consuming, will feel alleviated from the guilt associated with the ethical, environmental and health concerns(Haynes & Podobsky, 2016). Guilt-free products often set narratives with positive attributes, including health benefits and ethical environmental practices like organic or fair trade. These narratives align well with Genz's ideology of food consumption. Guilt-free food is an emerging concept and a novel concept in terms of sustainable food practices. We aim to understand the contributing behavioral and psychological factors amongst Genz leading to the purchase and consumption of Guilt free food. Understanding these factors will be beneficial in various ways. Studying Genz's behaviour can help us identify potential misconceptions and promote a more guilt-free

food approach. Understanding motivations behind guilt free choices can lead to more ethical and effective marketing strategies. It will also allow the food industry to predict future trends with respect to upcoming food habits.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Attitude and Intention to purchase guilt-free food

The relationship between attitudes and behavioral intentions has been a central focus in social psychology (Maio & Olson, 1995). These relationships have been studied through frameworks like the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Schifter & Ajzen, 1985; Thomas Sarver, 1983). Attitudes are predispositions toward an object, person, or behaviour, including cognitive, affective, and behavioural components (Ostrom, 1969).

The cognitive aspect involves beliefs about the consequences of a behaviour. The affective component reflects feelings toward a particular behaviour. The behavioural dimension represents an individual's readiness to act according to it.

According to TRA, attitudes are key determinants of behavioral intention (Stephen et al., 1983). For example, if someone believes that regular exercise improves physical health (cognitive), feels good about staying fit (affective), and is inclined to adopt a workout routine (behavioral), they are more likely to develop an intention to exercise. This evaluative process highlights the role of behavioral beliefs in shaping attitudes. Meta-analyses have consistently demonstrated strong correlations between attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. For instance, research indicates that the attitude-intention relationship is stronger than the direct attitude-behavior link because intentions mediate this relationship (KIM & HUNTER, 1993). Studies also show that stronger attitudes—characterized by high certainty and personal relevance—are more likely to translate into consistent intentions and behaviors (Bechler et al., 2021).

From our discussion, we hypothesize
H1- The attitude of GenZ buyers will impact their Intention to purchase guilt-free food

Subjective norm and Intention to purchase guilt-free food.

Subjective norm (SuBN) quantifies how social pressures affect a person's decision to engage in a behavior (Miguel et al., 2022). It's calculated by combining an individual's beliefs about what important people think they should do with their desire to follow those expectations. These social expectations are formed by two key influences: injunctive norms, which are perceptions of what others approve or disapprove of, and descriptive norms, which are observations of how others actually behave (Bosnjak et al., 2020). These norms were exceptionally strong predictors of health-related actions, exceeding their influence in general behavior (Finlay et al., 1999). Unique importance of subjective norms in health behaviors lies in the confidence people possess regarding the opinions of their key social referents (Terry & Hogg, 1996). Despite having a strong influence of subjective norm and intention to purchase, studies have given mixed results in terms of organic food purchases. Subjective norms, assessed through injunctive questions, did not significantly predict purchase intentions (Ham et al., 2015). In contrast, studies focusing on sustainable and organic food consumption found a significant positive link between subjective norms and consumer purchase intentions (Chen, 2007).

Given the inconsistent findings in previous research and the unique characteristics of Generation Z, it is crucial to investigate the impact of subjective norms on their intention to purchase guilt-free food.

From our discussion, we hypothesize
H2- The subjective norms of GenZ buyers will impact their Intention to purchase guilt-free food

Perceived control and Intention to purchase guilt free food

Perceived behavioural control (PBC) refers to an individual's belief in their ability to execute a behaviour (Abbasi et al., 2021). It includes access to tangible or intangible tools required for the behavior and confidence in overcoming obstacles to perform the behavior. In food choice contexts, PBC influences intentions to purchase domestic products (Miguel et al., 2022). The same results extend to local foods where PBC influences the intention to buy

local food products (Shin & Hancer, 2016). Individuals' PBCs are influenced by constraints that originate from either internal or external sources. Internal sources relate to personal attributes like knowledge and self-efficacy, whereas external sources are rooted in environmental factors (Ajzen, 1991). Within the realm of healthy food-related behaviours, researchers have extensively explored the relationship between perceived behavioural control and the intention to engage in such behaviors (Kim et al., 2013). In perceived behavioural control amongst Genz food drive, price might play an important role. However research have revealed that While price and affordability are undeniably critical determinants, consumers may prioritize need satisfaction over cost, willingly paying a premium (Kabir & Islam, 2021). Studies on guilt free food behaviour highlight the role of perceived control and how it triggers goal directed behavior (Maloney et al., 2019). There are contradictory studies where Genz show more impulsivity and engage in emotional snacking leading to less behavioural control (Priporas et al., 2022). Hence it becomes crucial to understand the impact of perceived control on behavioural intention amongst Genz

From our discussion, we hypothesize
H3- The perceived behavioural control of Gen Z buyers will impact their Intention to purchase guilt-free food

Food neophobia, purchase intention and purchase behaviour

Food neophobia or FN is the tendency to avoid or be hesitant about consuming unfamiliar foods (Dovey et al., 2008). This behaviors is thought to stem from the omnivore's dilemma: while humans need to explore new food sources to sustain themselves, they must also be cautious of potentially harmful or toxic foods, which leads to a naturally limited diet (Damsbo-Svendsen et al., 2017). There is a statistically significant interaction between gender and generational cohort in predicting food neophilia, where Gen Z travelers are less likely to try new foods than Gen Y travelers (Okumus et al., 2021). Beyond brick-and-mortar retail, the analysis of purchase behavior has adapted to address modern marketing trends, including sustainable consumption and the rise of e-commerce (Peña-García et al., 2020). The feeling of guilt significantly influences what consumers choose to buy and their intentions to purchase, with recent research increasingly exploring the underlying psychological factors. As a negative emotion, guilt triggered by food-related situations can restrict consumer decision-making, ultimately affecting their purchasing behaviors (Yang & Kim, 2021). Recent studies conducted on organic food consumption has found the moderating effect of food neophobia on purchase behavior (Kashif et al., 2021). Despite compelling evidences from the organic food market, there is lack of research on the moderating effects of food neophobia on the purchase intention and purchase behavior amongst Genz.

From our discussion, we hypothesize
H4- Food neophobia will moderate purchase intention and purchase behaviors amongst Gen buyers.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Sample Details

This study gathered data from Generation Z students residing in major Indian cities, namely Bangalore, Delhi NCR, Chennai, Mumbai, and Lavasa. Using a non-probability sampling method, 511 students were contacted via email with Google Forms. 387 students responded, and after removing 69 incomplete or disengaged responses, the final sample consisted of 318 participants.

3.2. Research Instrument

The following research instruments were used in this study to measure key variables. To assess attitudes towards guilt-free food purchases, an adapted scale was employed, drawing from the frameworks developed by French et al. (2005) and Hsu et al. (2006). Subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and intention to perform the behavior (purchasing guilt-free food) were all measured using adapted scales based on the work of Al-Swidi et al. (2014). Specifically, these scales were chosen to capture the social pressures, perceived ease or difficulty, and motivational drive associated with purchasing guilt-free food within the Generation Z demographic. The adoption of these scales facilitated the examination of relationships between these constructs and their influence on purchasing behavior.

3.3 Pilot Study

A recent trend of consuming more conscious food was observed amongst college students falling into the age range of 19- 25. Informed by these insights, a pilot study was conducted with 50 participants to explore potential interrelationships between these issues and their influence on intention to purchase guilt-free foods. Results revealed significant positive correlations between perceived social norms, perceived behavioral control, attitudes towards guilt-free food, and purchase intentions.

3.4 Data Collection Process

Data collection for this study, examining Generation Z's guilt-free food consumption, was conducted over a 16-week period. Initially, demographic information was gathered. Subsequently, an eight-week phase focused on measuring attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control related to guilt-free food. Following a four-week interval, data on food neophobia was conducted.

3.5 Sampling Technique & Size

We utilized random sampling to obtain a representative and diverse sample of 384 students, thereby increasing the generalizability of our study and reducing selection bias. To ensure both practical feasibility and statistically significant outcomes, while minimizing participant burden, we focused our analysis on 352 college students, which proved sufficient for our research objectives.

3.6 Face and Content Validity

Content validity was established through two primary methods: first, a panel of social psychologists reviewed the instrument to ensure its relevance to the participant population. Second, a well-established questionnaire, designed to comprehensively cover the relevant dimensions of the study, was selected.

4. RESULTS & INTERPRETATION

IBM SPSS and Amos have been used to measure the variables and test the analysis. The hypothesis will be proven or rejected based on the data analysis of the results. The data analysis will include descriptive, reliability of the variables, Cronbach's alpha, fit indices of the variable, structural equational model, regression and correlation coefficients.

4.1 Construct Validity

Cronbach's alpha reliability test was initially conducted via SPSS software to determine the reliability of the data (Taber, 2018). A score of 0.7 or above indicates satisfactory levels for the constructs (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2011). Table 1 contains the Cronbach's alpha scores above 0.7 which indicates satisfactory levels, thus establishing the internal reliability. The average variance extracted, and construct reliability as shown in Table 1 is higher than 0.5 and 0.7 respectively indicating convergent validity and construct reliability to be established (Hair et al., 2019). The factor loading, mean and standard deviation is also shown in Table 1.

4.2 Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test (KMO) is a test that measures whether the data sample is accurate for factor analysis and value above 0.6 is considered to be useful (Shrestha, 2021). The values of KMO depicted in Table 2 have value more than 0.6 which indicates that the data is suitable for the factor loading.

4.3 Discriminant validity

Discriminatory validity of scales is conducted to ensure that every element in the scale represents a separate dimension. Covariance correlation was utilized to establish the relationship between the constructs and further strengthen the results of discriminant value. The square root of average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct and its squared correlation are compared to establish discriminant validity. In order to access discriminant validity, it is essential to ensure that the correlation coefficient between any pair of constructs doesn't include 1. As shown in table 2, it confirms that the variables have distinctive concepts. Discriminant validity is established by comparing AVE with squared correlation with another construct which should not exceed 1 (Voorhees et al., 2015). Table 3 shows that these conditions are met, hence establishing the validity.

4.4 Structural equation model and hypothesis testing

Using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS 2.0, the study tested the proposed hypotheses. The analysis provided significant

support for hypotheses H2 and H3, but not for H1 or H4 as shown in Table3. Specifically, it was found that subjective norms positively and significantly predicted purchase intention ($\beta = 0.558$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social pressures strongly influence Gen Z's intention to purchase guilt-free food. Similarly, perceived control negatively and significantly predicted purchase intention ($\beta = -0.196$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that a higher perceived lack of control decreases purchase intentions. However, the hypothesis that attitudes would significantly predict purchase intention (H1) was not supported ($\beta = -0.03$, $p > 0.05$). Additionally, the hypothesis that food neophobia would moderate purchase intention and purchase behavior (H4) was not supported.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

The results indicate that attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control impacts the purchase intention (H1, H2, H3).The study's results indicate that there is a positive influence of attitude on the purchase intention of guilt-free food amongst Gen Z (Kumar et al., 2023). The study shows that consumers' purchase intentions are influenced by media communication. Further results suggest that subjective norm has a significant positive impact on the consumers' purchase intention (Negm, 2019; Shimul et al., 2021). The results of the study also indicate that perceived behaviour control significantly affects the purchase intention. In the general public, there is an increasing awareness of protecting the environment, due to which consumers have started to exhibit a marked preference for green products (Wu & Chen, 2014). Gen Z are more conscious about what they consume due to the increase in the usage of social media (Ghaffar et al., 2023). In the Indian population, there is a greater influence of family, relatives, and peers, and they significantly affect Gen Z's purchasing decisions (Chauhan & Bhagat, 2018; Gupta et al., 2024; Sengupta et al., 2024). The results indicated that attitudes toward advertising and susceptibility to reference group influence significantly impact Generation Z's willingness to disclose personal information on social media (Rózsa et al., 2024). The study found that food neophobia didn't have any impact on the purchase intention (H4). Research on food neophobia among Indian Gen Z shows mixed results. A study of female college students in Southern India found no significant difference in neophobic tendencies between age groups 15-17 and 18-19 years (Chitra et al., 2016). However, another study in Chandigarh Tri-City, India, reported that food neophobia strongly influences eating habits and is directly responsible for lesser nutrition in individuals with high neophobia (Kalra et al., 2022). These findings suggest that food neophobia varies across demographics and can impact dietary choices, highlighting the need for further research to understand its complexities in different populations. However, the study is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, and the context specificity of the study limits its applicability to other food categories or cultural contexts. Furthermore, while key predictors were examined, other potentially influential factors were not included like price perceptions and environmental constraints. Future research should consider these limitations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's food choices.

Table 1 Construct Reliability

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	Mean	SD	AVE	CR	Cronbach's
Attitude	AL1	0.91	2.4	1.13	0.81	0.92	0.89
	AL2	0.88	2.54	1.14			
	AL3	0.91	2.59	1.20			
Subjective Norms	SN1	0.70	3.4	1.20	0.61	0.722	0.71
	SN2	0.59	3.26	1.09			
	SN3	0.75	2.13	1.27			
Perceived Control	PC1	0.85	2.17	2.17	0.68	0.86	0.81
	PC2	0.85	2.26	2.26			
	PC3	0.79	2.42	2.42			

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	Mean	SD	AVE	CR	Cronbach's
Food Neophobia	FN1	0.87	2.99	2.99	0.72	0.88	0.81
	FN2	0.88	3.09	3.09			
	FN3	0.81	2.96	2.96			
Purchase Behaviour	PB1	0.62	3.76	0.82	0.51	0.67	0.72
	PB2	0.68	3.98	0.98			
	PB3	0.63	3.87	0.866			
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.77	4.0	1.02	0.52	0.64	0.7
	PI2	0.17	3.81	0.84			
	PI3	0.78	4.07	1.01			

Table 2 Discriminant Validity

Constructs	KMO	AL	SN	PC	FN	PB	PI
AL	0.71	(0.90)					
SN	0.72	0.83	(0.68)				
PC	0.71	0.51	0.447**	(0.83)			
FN	-0.71	-0.11	-0.09	-0.20	(0.83)		
PB	0.69	0.09**	0.48**	0.51**	-0.30	(0.85)	
PI	0.68	0.11**	0.51**	-0.01	-0.035	0.66**	(0.64)

Table 3: Structural equation model results

Structural Equation Model				Estimate	S.E	CR	*p*	Label
H_1	attitude	←	purchase intention	-0.03	0.035	0.983	***	Not supported
H_2	subjective Norms	←	purchase intention	0.558	0.40	13.814	***	Supported
H_3	Perceived control	←	purchase intention	-0.196	0.03	-6.130	***	Supported
Notes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001								

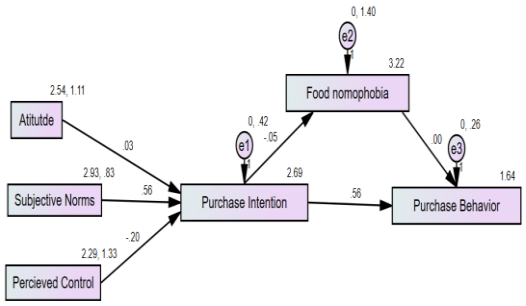

Figure 1 SEM analysis

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