

Gen Z Consumers' Perception of Sustainability, Cleanliness, and Interest in Buying Digital Thrift Products

Aditya Budi Krisnanto^{1,*} Priana Indarti¹

¹ Universitas Merdeka Malang

*Corresponding author. Email: krisnanto.aditya@unmer.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Generation Z's preference for online shopping is one example of how consumer behavior has evolved, particularly the practice of purchasing thrift goods online. The purpose of this study is to characterize how generation Z consumers view cleanliness, sustainability, and their desire to purchase digital thrift products. Using a descriptive quantitative approach, the study gathers data via an online survey that satisfies purposive sampling requirements. There were 127 responders in total. The findings demonstrate that Generation Z's view of sustainability demonstrates a deep understanding of its significance. Concerns regarding the hygienic aspect of buying used goods online are indicated by the perception of thrift store products' cleanliness. Interest in purchasing digital thrift products is contingent upon the sustainability and cleanliness standards of the product being met. These results support the notion that in order to increase the purchasing interest of young consumers, digital thrift product marketing strategies should incorporate sustainability narratives and transparency regarding hygiene. In the age of ecologically conscious consumption, this study adds to the body of knowledge on sustainable consumer behavior and provides useful advice for digital thrift business actors on how to make their goods more appealing.

Keywords: Thrift Product, Perceived Sustainability, Perceived Hygiene, Digital Thrifting.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been shifts in the patterns of consumption. Among them is raising awareness of sustainable living and environmental issues. The thrifting phenomenon is a new phenomenon that results from this shift in consumption, where it is no longer undervalued to buy pre-owned or used goods, particularly fashion items.

With the development of digital technology, thrifting has evolved from being limited to transactions in physical stores to becoming a more widespread and accessible activity through online platforms like Instagram, TikTok Shop, Shopee, and specialized marketplaces for secondhand clothing. The term "digital thrifting" was coined as a result of this phenomenon. This phenomenon appears among generation Z.

Generation Z, as the generation that grew up in the digital ecosystem, played a central role in bringing this trend to life. The characteristics of Gen Z who are tech-savvy, environmentally conscious, and socially value-oriented make them a target market as well as a key driver of sustainable consumption practices, including digital thrifting (Bhatnagar et al., 2020). Buying thrift items is not just about saving expenses, but also a form of advocacy for the values that they believe they care about the future of the earth and the need for sustainability.

One of the biggest challenges with thrift products is the perception of the cleanliness of thrift products. Used or preloved products are often identified with hygiene risks, ranging from concerns about the cleanliness of clothes, fear of potential contamination, to emotional discomfort when using other people's belongings. Online shopping, where shoppers cannot physically inspect products in person, makes concerns about the hygiene of thrift products even greater.

This concern is important to understand, because the purchase decision is not only based on environmental rationality, but also on personal perceptions related to comfort and safety. Buying interest in digital thrift products is the result of a complex interplay between sustainability perceptions, hygiene concerns, and other emotional factors. Buying interest reflects an individual's desire to make a purchase and is an important indicator in predicting actual consumer behavior. Therefore, understanding how Gen Z views sustainability and cleanliness aspects in the context of digital thrifting products is key in designing marketing strategies, consumer education, and thrift business development in the digital era.

Previous studies have indeed discussed many factors that affect the purchasing behavior of environmentally friendly products, including the concept of perceived sustainability (Joshi & Rahman, 2015) and perceived hygiene in the context of secondhand products (Prisco et al, 2025). However, most of the studies still focus on new green-labeled products or conventional secondhand transactions, rather than digital thrifting, which has unique characteristics: low physical interaction with the product, high reliance on seller credibility, and speed of the purchase process.

Based on this background, this study aims to describe Generation Z's perception of sustainability, cleanliness, and its relationship with interest in buying digital thrift products.

1.1. Digital Thrifting: Changing Shopping Patterns

Digital thrifting is one of the changes in shopping patterns resulting from the development of digital technology (Kian Yeik, 2023). Thrifting, which was initially synonymous with hunting for second-hand goods in physical stores, has now evolved into an online-based activity through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Shopee, and various secondhand marketplaces. Digital thrifting gives consumers the opportunity to access a wide range of preloved products more easily, quickly, and without geographical restrictions.

Shoppers can simply browse digital thrift shop accounts, select products, make payments, and wait for goods to be delivered. This convenience increases the market for the secondhand goods industry to develop more widely, including among Generation Z. This phenomenon not only reflects changes in distribution channels, but also shifts in value in society.

Generation Z, i.e. those born between 1997 to 2012, is a demographic group that has unique characteristics in their consumption patterns. Generation Z is accustomed to using technology from an early age and has access to global information on social issues, including climate change, pollution, and sustainability. This generation expects companies to implement responsible business practices. Generation Z also makes decisions to consume a product based on the values they adhere (Cialdini, 2009). Digital thrifting offers more value to Generation Z consumers, where they can save costs, get unique products that are no longer available on the general market, while contributing to the reduction of global fashion waste.

1.2. Perceived Sustainability

Perceived sustainability is the consumer's perception of the extent to which a product, service, or consumption action contributes to environmental sustainability and the reduction of negative impacts on the planet. In the context of digital thrifting, buying used products is considered an effort to reduce the consumption of new products with new resources and minimize the production of textile waste. According to Joshi and Rahman (2015), sustainability awareness influences consumer preferences for green and sustainable products.

The higher the perceived sustainability, the more likely consumers are to view a product or consumption behavior positively. Consumers feel that shopping for used products is pro-environmental and will seek to maintain that behavior or even recommend it to others. Transparency about the product selection process, sanitation efforts, and a strong sustainability narrative are factors that reinforce these positive perceptions.

1.3. Perceived Hygiene

Perceived hygiene is an individual's subjective perception of the cleanliness, safety, and health of a product. In the context of buying used or preloved or thrift products, concerns arise about product hygiene. This is one of the factors that most often appears as a barrier to purchasing thrift product purchases.

Prisco et al. (2025) mentioned that although consumers may be interested in secondhand products in terms of price or sustainability, uncertainty about the physical condition of the product often causes psychological resistance. Digital thrifting, where consumers can't touch, smell, or see products directly before purchasing, makes those concerns even greater.

The perception that thrift products are "less hygienic" can be a strong barrier, even among young consumers who have high sustainability values. This explains why some consumers who support the principle of the circular economy, are still reluctant to buy used products online.

1.2. Purchase Intention Digital Thrift Products

Purchase intention refers to an individual's desire or tendency to buy a product. In digital thrifting, purchase intention is influenced by several things, including the perception of sustainability, cleanliness, price, and product uniqueness.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), in the Theory of Reasoned Action, intention is the main predictor of actual behavior. If a consumer has a high interest in buying a thrift product, they are likely to proceed to the purchase transaction. Purchase intention can be measured by how much Gen Z consumers are willing to search for digital thrift products, make purchases, and recommend the experience to others.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive quantitative approach, with the aim of describing the perception of Generation Z consumers towards sustainability, cleanliness, and interest in buying digital thrift products. The population of this study is Generation Z who have experience or knowledge about purchasing thrift products through digital platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok Shop, Shopee, or similar marketplaces. The sample was taken using the purposive sampling technique, with criteria between 18–23 years old, having bought or familiar with digital thrift products and actively using social media or e-commerce platforms. The research was conducted by distributing questionnaires online and obtained 127 respondents. The questionnaire was compiled in the form of a 5-point Likert scale, which contained demographic data, perceived sustainability, perceived hygiene and purchase intention digital thrift product variables. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research is a descriptive research. Based on the questionnaire obtained from the respondents, the results were obtained as shown at Table 1 and Table 2. The results of the questionnaire showed that the majority of respondents were women (56.69%). The respondents' monthly expenses are between IDR 500,000 to IDR 3,000,000, which shows that the target market for this digital thrift is in the middle consumer segment which has quite potential. The most commonly used digital platform to browse or buy thrift products is Instagram (43.32%), followed by Tiktok Shop (29.13%), which shows that visual and storytelling approaches on social media are becoming very important to attract the attention of Gen Z consumers.

Table 1. Respondent Identity

Data	Category	Percent
Gender	Male	43.31%
	Female	56.69%
Spending / Month	< 500.000	12.59%
	500.000 – 1.500.000	42.52%
	1.500.000 – 3.000.000	37.80%
	>3.000.000	7.09%
Digital Platform	Instagram	43.32%
	Tiktok Shop	29.13%
	Shopee	17.32%
	Other	10.23%

Table 2. Descriptive

Statement	Frequency Percentage					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
Perceived Sustainability						
Buying thrift products helps reduce waste	0,00	0,00	6,30	50,39	43,31	4,37
Thrift products contribute to the reduction of the consumption of new natural resources.	0,00	5,51	18,11	40,16	36,22	4,07

Statement	Frequency Percentage					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
I feel that buying thrift products extends the life cycle of clothes	0,00	7,87	59,84	25,98	6,30	3,31
Buying thrift is part of the eco-friendly lifestyle I support	0,00	7,09	9,45	37,01	46,46	4,23
I feel more socially responsible when choosing thrift products.	0,00	3,15	27,56	40,16	29,13	3,95
Perceived Hygiene						
I was worried that thrift products weren't really clean.	0,00	3,15	23,62	56,69	16,54	3,87
I'm afraid thrift products carry bacteria or germs.	0,00	0,00	20,47	60,63	18,90	3,98
I feel uncomfortable using items that other people have already used.	0,00	22,05	27,56	33,86	16,54	3,45
I feel the need to re-clean the thrift product before use.	0,00	0,00	6,30	44,88	48,82	4,43
I find the hygiene quality of thrift products difficult to verify online.	0,00	16,54	29,13	39,37	14,96	3,53
Purchase Intention Digital Thrift Product						
I intend to look for new thrift products on a regular basis.	0,00	13,39	42,52	27,56	16,54	3,47
I would recommend thrift products to friends and family.	0,00	4,72	29,13	38,58	27,56	3,89
I feel more satisfied buying thrift products than regular new products.	7,87	22,05	27,56	34,65	8,66	3,09
I want to buy a thrift product even though it costs a bit more than the new product.	13,39	31,50	33,86	17,32	3,94	2,54
I am motivated to participate in discount events or special promos for digital thrift products.	0,00	2,36	25,98	52,76	19,69	3,92
I feel proud to use thrift products in my daily life	0,00	5,51	19,69	44,88	29,92	3,99

The results of this study show that the majority of Generation Z respondents have a high perception of sustainability towards the purchase practices of digital thrift products. The average score for the perceived sustainability indicator shows a positive trend, confirming that Gen Z in Indonesia not only understands sustainability issues, but also positions them as part of their consumption value. These findings are in line with a study conducted by Buckley et al. (2019), which stated that young people globally increasingly view sustainable consumption as their social identity. In the context of the Theory of Planned Behavior put forward by Ajzen (1991), a positive attitude toward behavior — in this case, buying a thrift product — is a key predictor of intention to do so. A high perception of sustainability reinforces a positive attitude towards thrift shopping, which in turn increases the tendency to buy.

However, this high perception of sustainability does not stand alone. The results of the study also revealed that the perception of cleanliness of thrift products remains a significant concern. The average perceived hygiene score is in the high range. While they value the environmental aspect, concerns about product hygiene, health, and safety remain overshadowed purchasing decisions. This condition strengthens the findings of Silva et al. (2021), who stated that perceived hygiene is the main inhibiting factor in the consumption of secondhand products, especially in the clothing and accessories category. The inability to verify cleanliness directly, coupled with the lack of sanitation guarantees in digital transactions, magnifies the perception of risk in the eyes of consumers. Even in environmentally conscious groups, disgust or distrust of product cleanliness can invalidate a supposedly strong purchase intent.

Furthermore, this study also found that interest in buying digital thrift products among Gen Z is quite high, even though it is conditional. Consumers show a tendency to buy thrift products if they meet expectations for sustainability and cleanliness. This clarifies the concept of perceived value in consumer behavior, as described by Zeithaml (1988), where purchasing decisions are based not only on price or functionality alone, but also on the overall perception of the value received—which in this case includes environmental value and hygiene value.

Interestingly, these results also show a shift in the way Gen Z consumers rate products. If in the previous generation the secondhand purchase decision was dominated by the price factor, then in this generation, the social value factor and

moral value (such as sustainability) are given much greater weight. These findings are consistent with the results of research from Kim & Cho (2024) which showed that Gen Z tends to adopt ethical consumption patterns as part of their self-identity construct.

Based on these results, the practical implication that can be drawn is that sellers of digital thrift products must build a dual narrative: reinforce the image of sustainability and remove doubts about cleanliness. Providing transparent information about the product cleaning process, communicating sanitation procedures, and offering a warranty or return policy can be an important strategy to overcome perceived hygiene barriers.

Furthermore, building a community of consumers who share the value of sustainability and value thrift as a lifestyle identity can strengthen purchase intent socially. According to the literature on social proof (Cialdini, 2009), the presence of a strong community and positive testimonials can reduce risk perception and increase the adoption of new consumption behaviors.

4. CONCLUSION

The way that Generation Z views cleanliness, sustainability, and their desire to purchase digital thrift products. According to the study's findings, Generation Z views digital thrifting as sustainable. While Generation Z acknowledges the significance of minimizing textile waste, they also view thrifting as a way for them to personally support environmental preservation initiatives. These results are consistent with earlier research demonstrating that Generation Z is more cognizant of sustainability concerns in consumption habits. Particularly in the context of digital transactions that minimize the physical experience, Generation Z views hygiene as a significant factor in determining their trust in secondhand goods. If Generation Z is satisfied with the product's sustainability and hygienic issues are resolved, they will be more inclined to purchase thrift products online. This study supports the idea of the Theory of Planned Behavior, which holds that a favorable attitude toward a behavior helps intentions form, a favorable attitude toward sustainability creates interest in purchasing.

The intricacy of sustainable consumption behavior in the digital age is thus demonstrated by the interaction between sustainability and hygiene factors in influencing purchasing interest. A certificate or a narrative that has been thoroughly cleaned can be used by sellers to create a story about the sustainability and cleanliness of a product. Through social proof effects, user reviews can be used to support favorable opinions.

Since this study is descriptive, the causal relationship between variables has not been examined. In order to test the relationship model between sustainability perceptions, cleanliness, attitudes, and buying interest structurally, more research is advised using an inferential approach. Comparative studies between generations, such as with Generation Y or Alpha, would be an interesting use of other advanced research suggestions. For additional research, other factors like peer pressure and fear of missing out (FOMO) can be examined.

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