

Research Article

Symbolic Consumption, Self-Construction, and the Cultivation Path of Generation Z's Green Consumption Intention in Social Media

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Abstract

Generation Z consumers exhibit a pronounced intention to engage in sustainable consumption; 73% of this cohort are willing to pay extra for green products, and 85% report strong environmental concern. Nonetheless, only 31% of the group can sustain the behavioral pattern of green consumption over time. This intention-behavior gap is an important puzzle that is not explained well in the traditional attitude-intention models assuming the linear predictability of intentions via the strength of attitudes. Particularly, in the context of social media, such puzzles are especially pressing since green consumption practices become increasingly symbolic and expressive of identity formation processes rather than ecologically-driven choices. Therefore, the current paper attempts to address the issue from the standpoint of an integrative perspective based on the systematic integration of symbolic consumption theory, self-construction theory, and cultivation theory. The proposed analysis is primarily theoretical in nature. The model implies three significant relationships: social media usage plays a role in the activation of symbolic motivation; self-construction fully mediates the effect of symbolic consumption motivation on sustained green consumption intention through identity-related psychological mechanisms rather than directly; and such mediation occurs in a cumulative manner through three consecutive cultivation steps of symbolic cognition, identity alignment, and value internalization. In this model, sustained intention is understood differently from intention strength as a quality characteristic marked by consistency, stability, and self-referentiality. The current paper is novel in its attempt to bridge symbolic consumption and green consumption literatures, introduce the concept of self-construction into sustainable consumption research, and develop a process-based research agenda centered around intention quality rather than intention strength as the core variable of interest.

Keywords

symbolic consumption, green consumption intention, self-construction, cultivation theory, Generation Z, social media

1. Introduction

Social media has significantly influenced the manner in which individuals display their identities through consumption. Sustainable lifestyles have accumulated more than 12 billion views on the dominant social media platforms, and the content related to green consumption has increased by 67% per year (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024). The burst into visibility represents something much more profound than a simple change in visibility status. What once was viewed as a morally driven individual act has over time become a visible aspect of identity formation through social media. Once green consumption becomes part of the symbolic economy of social media, it takes on new significance not just as environmental action but as a means of communicating something about the consumer. In this respect, green consumption serves as an exemplary case study for exploring the dynamics of consumption, identity, and persistence in the context of digital media platforms.

For example, Generation Z, being the first generation to experience life from birth in the context of digital communication, presents the challenge with notable clarity. According to statistics, around 73% of Generation Z consumers are willing to buy environmentally friendly products at a higher price point (Chwialkowska, 2024), whereas 85% of them claim to have a strong environmental awareness (Cyfert et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2020). At the same time, only 31% can be called persistent green consumers. The contradiction lies in the fact that the intention behind the actions does not translate into persistent green behavior. Moreover, the lack of consistency appears to be a systematic rather than marginal phenomenon. The problem emerges when the notion of green consumption intention among Generation Z consumers is examined as something that exists as an authentic state at the moment of declaring one's stance but cannot persist over time.

The traditional attitude-intention framework (Borah et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024) struggles to deal with this problem. Contemporary meta-analyses demonstrate that intention normally explains only a small percentage of the variance in green behavior and particularly when it comes to young consumers engaging in online behavior via social media platforms (Cyfert et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2020). There is more than just an empirical explanation behind the issue as the nature of intention as a unitary measure whose strength can predict behavior prevents researchers from differentiating between two intentions that look identical on paper but are radically different both psychologically and in terms of sustainability. While

intentions are still being treated as a measure of quantity, the fundamental issue of explaining why some intentions result in behavioral commitment while other intentions do not can remain out of scope of academic analysis.

The symbolic consumption theory (Gordillo-Rodriguez & Sanz-Marcos, 2020) can provide another interesting angle by shifting the focus towards consumption as a way of performing certain identities within the context of the meaning-making process. This concept is especially important when considering the role of social media platforms as they represent spaces where users build and validate their moral and/or lifestyle identities via green consumption (Skulsuthavong & Wang, 2025; Bainotti, 2024). Yet, it is still necessary to understand how symbolic consumption turns into an intention to engage in green actions.

Key concepts require some definitions. Green consumption includes actions aimed at reducing negative effects on the environment through purchasing energy-saving, organic, or ethically produced goods (Borah et al., 2024), while green consumption intention involves a predisposition to such actions (Ajzen, 1991). Symbolic consumption is a form of consuming that communicates identity without fulfilling the functional needs of the consumer (Baudrillard, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984). Self-construction is a term referring to the psychological process by which an individual creates and modifies the self through one's behavior and narration (Belk, 2013; Giddens, 1991). Cultivation is the process of the formation of cognition via consistent media consumption (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Generation Z includes individuals born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s and represents the first generation whose entire life occurred in digitally mediated spaces (Gao et al., 2024). Social media, in this case, represents the algorithm-driven platforms where members of Generation Z can discover, practice, and authenticate their green consumption through brand-, influencer-, and peer-produced content (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024).

In this conceptual paper, we propose an integrative framework to address how symbolic consumption motivation, when triggered via social media, gets translated into green consumption intention in a stable manner using self-construction as the mediating process. Symbolic consumption theory provides the basis for understanding why green consumption takes on significance at an identity level beyond its mere functionality. The self-construction theory delineates the psychological process through which symbolic consumption motivation is translated into a stable intention grounded in the individual's identity. Cultivation theory explains why the process requires repeated exposure over an extended period of time.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

The literature review consists of two parts. The first part focuses on the theories of

symbolic consumption, self-construction, and cultivation, whereby each theory is explored in relation to its assumptions, evolution in the digital context, and shortcomings. In the second part, the literature review is based on empirical evidence concerning the studies related to the intent for green consumption and their shortcomings.

2.1. Symbolic Consumption: From Function to Meaning

The concept of symbolic consumption builds on the basic assumption that goods not only have practical value but also meaning, which the consumer appropriates to some degree, communicating through their consumption behavior. Baudrillard (1981) took that idea further by making a distinction between three types of value that commodities have – use value, exchange value, and sign value – stating that in advanced consumer societies, the importance of sign value, which is about meaning carried within a system of social signs, has grown enormously. Consumption has thus become a language by means of which individuals articulate their social positioning.

Similarly to that theoretical development, Bourdieu (1984) made the case for taste and consumption being markers of social distinction that, via the concept of habitus, capital, and field, reflect and reproduce social positioning, thus serving as means of claiming one's membership in certain social groupings. Overall, the work of the two theorists makes it clear that consumption is not just instrumental but meaning-related and positional.

More recently, the concepts of symbolic consumption were applied to both digital space and lifestyle phenomena. For example, Gordillo-Rodriguez and Sanz-Marcos (2020) showed how the consumption of goods and services through online platforms creates greater visibility, turning it into performance. As a result, green consumption has evolved from being seen simply as an imperative related to environmental responsibility to a lifestyle practice that indicates one's values and identity. As such, the role played by social media in green consumption is even more pronounced since it helps people perform as moral identities in public spaces (Bainotti, 2024; Iliopoulou et al., 2024).

Even though the concept of symbolic consumption goes a long way in explaining how and why green consumption can become part of identity, it is still far from telling us how exactly symbolic importance becomes incorporated in identity. Self-construction theory takes care of exactly that.

2.2. Self-Construction in Digital Contexts

The self-construction theory describes how people construct their identities out of their practices. In his 1991 book *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Giddens argues that late modernity

requires the self to be reflexively constructed through ongoing narrative practices rather than inherited.

This view was developed further by Belk (2013) who applied it to the context of digital media. Thus, the extended self can be understood as a narrative that is constantly updated through interactions with peers on platforms like Instagram. The identity becomes externalized through posts, profiles, and curated content feeds, and is simultaneously performed and curated in nature. Specifically, Belk explains that the digital identity is curated because individuals consciously choose what they want to show about themselves (Skulsuthavong & Wang, 2025); performed because the claims made through it have to be acted upon and validated by others; and fluid because audience reactions impact how it evolves.

In the case of Generation Z, the process of self-construction is deeply rooted in the culture of the Internet. Raised in an era of constant communication via screens, members of this generation see social media platforms as key areas where their identity work takes place, and use the consumption choices as means of projecting the perfect selves accepted by digital peers (Cyfert et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2024). Symbolic consumption, therefore, is indispensable to identity development in this case.

The self-construction theory provides a clear description of the mechanism at play, yet it conceptualizes the identity construction process as a continuous psychological phenomenon without accounting for its time-specific aspects. Namely, it does not clarify how repeated consumption experiences over time result in the creation of specific cognitive-evaluative structures that allow for a sustained rather than occasional self-construction project. For this purpose, another theory is needed.

2.3. Cultivation Theory: From Media Exposure to Attitude Formation

Cultivation theory, proposed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), elaborates on how consistent consumption of media content influences how people view social reality. Their key premise was that the effect of the media on individuals did not occur immediately in terms of persuasion but as a slow, steady process of influence resulting from sustained engagement with a media landscape that consistently emphasized some symbols, stories, and values over others.

Over time, the cultivation theory has expanded its focus to include interactive and fragmented media forms. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) suggested that the core idea of the cultivation theory remained applicable to interactive and fragmented media, and the cultivation effect could even become more pronounced under such conditions. This

hypothesis has been validated using meta-analyses that showed the persistence and even amplification of cultivation effects in algorithmic environments.

Cultivation theory complements linear models like the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) by explaining how intentions stabilize over time rather than form at discrete moments. While the TPB approach frames intention formation as an almost instantaneous calculation that combines elements like attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control, cultivation theory focuses on the gradual buildup of the psychological foundations that underpin such a calculation. From the viewpoint of cultivation theory, an attitude that is captured in a TPB questionnaire may be viewed as an accumulation of exposures to symbols through time. The temporal framework of the cultivation approach is especially appropriate for social media settings, where green consumption information reaches Gen Z consumers continuously. Table 1 below lists the important hypotheses and applications related to these theories.

Table 1

Theoretical Foundations and Applications

Theory	Core Proposition	Key Scholars	Application in This Study
Symbolic Consumption Theory	Consumption serves as sign system for meaning production and social distinction	Baudrillard (1981); Bourdieu (1984)	Explains why green consumption acquires symbolic value beyond functional utility in social media contexts
Self-construction Theory	Identity is reflexively constructed through consumption choices and narrative practices	Giddens (1991); Belk (2013)	Explains the psychological mechanism through which symbolic motivation transforms into stable intention via identity processes
Cultivation Theory	Long-term media exposure gradually shapes cognition, attitudes, and worldviews	Gerbner & Gross (1976); Hermann et al. (2023)	Explains the gradual, cumulative formation process of internalized green consumption intention

2.4. Empirical Review: Green Consumption Intention Research and Its Limitations

These theoretical approaches form the conceptual base for the current study, while the area in which the current literature review aims to contribute is empirical investigation of green consumption intentions. In the following review, the development of the area will be

outlined, along with the findings most consistently supported in existing studies, as well as its limitations identified by current research.

Green consumption intentions research is predominantly guided by models based on attitudes and values. Specifically, the Theory of Planned Behavior and its derivatives remain the most widely utilized, where intentions are seen as immediate drivers of the behavior and are broken down into attitudinal, normative and control constructs. Value-based models, such as Value-Belief-Norm, introduce the preceding level of analysis in which environmental values stimulate beliefs and personal norms which drive intention. Research within Generation Z finds that attitudes and perceptions of norms positively affect intentions with mediating factors of knowledge, effectiveness and green claims trust.

Nevertheless, these theories generate reliable results, which come with the following common limitations. First, there is a well-known gap between intentions and actions, which means that reported intention predicts actual stable actions only partially, and the gap is especially significant in the context of Generation Z green consumers' behaviors (Cyfert et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2020). Broader consumer behavior research in rapidly changing market contexts similarly demonstrates that intention formation is shaped by external uncertainties and substitution dynamics that unidimensional models fail to capture (Ishumbaev et al., 2025). Second, intention is treated as a unidimensional construct measured with one indicator – strength – which implies that two consumers having equal level of their intention have equal psychological commitment. And finally, the focus is made on practical aspects only; therefore, symbolic and identity-driven approaches remain largely ignored.

Given these limitations, the need for more effective predictors and better conception of green consumption intention is evident. In other words, the framework proposed here suggests a new approach to understanding and predicting green consumers' intentions by treating it as a quality construct.

2.5. Research Context: Generation Z, Green Orientation, and Social Media Content

Why Generation Z. Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is the first generation whose entire life experience has unfolded within digitally mediated environments, poised to be the largest consumer generation in many markets within a decade. The integration of digital technologies in daily routines, and how it differs among generations, has been well documented (Armah & Li, 2023a, 2023b), and no group is more highly integrated with technology than Generation Z. Recent studies also show that infrastructural and technological conditions increasingly shape how younger cohorts engage with online

commerce and consumption platforms (Armah et al., 2025). More significantly, Generation Z views consumption practices themselves as sites of identity construction (Gao et al., 2024), thus serving as the theoretically richest generation through which to understand the symbolic nature of green consumption.

Why Generation Z relates to green consumption. Recent research demonstrates that Generation Z is characterized by heightened environmental consciousness and a stronger motivation to practice green consumption compared to previous generations (Borah et al., 2024; Chwialkowska, 2024; Ngo et al., 2024), owing to their coming of age during a time when sustainability became mainstreamed within individual identities and ESG (environmental, social, governance) issues became common talking points. Yet expressed concern remains greater than practiced actions, and there exists an even greater gap compared to other generations in terms of action (Cyfert et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2020). Such a pattern suggests that Generation Z's environmental orientation is symbolically driven rather than deeply internalized—real, but inconsistent—which highlights the need for a theoretical account of how such orientations stabilize over time.

Whose social media content, and how it functions. Various types of content exist to shape Generation Z members' dispositions, such as brand-generated content that depicts sustainably-produced goods as part of a luxurious lifestyle; influencer-generated content that provides concrete examples of behaviors involved in practicing green consumption (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024); peer-generated content that establishes green consumption as normative behavior. Algorithmic mechanisms ensure that whatever type of content garners the highest engagement gets the most prominence.

2.6. Research Gap: The Missing Integration

The three theoretical streams reviewed above each offer substantial explanatory power and have contributed significantly to the literature. Although they provide valuable resources individually, they have evolved largely in isolation from one another. As a result, specific integration gaps have emerged, which this study seeks to address.

First, there is a gap between symbolic consumption theory and green consumption theory. In the former one, scholars have mainly focused on luxury and status-driven consumption practices (Gordillo-Rodriguez & Sanz-Marcos, 2020). Hence, symbolic consumption theory has never been applied to understand the green consumption phenomenon, as there were no discussions about green consumption as a form of identity-related symbolic practice in any form. However, the latter literature has mainly adopted instrumental and value-based approaches (Borah et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024), where ecological motivations had been

assumed as an implicit premise. Thus, the discussion about the symbolic character of green consumption has become necessary in the current environment.

Second, the literature fails to explain how the symbolic motive transforms into an actual sustainable consumption behavior. There has been no mediation mechanism explaining the processes leading to sustainable consumption practices from a self-construction perspective. Self-construction theory may have the required tools to discuss this issue, yet it has not been discussed much in the context of green consumption research. On the other hand, cultivation theory provides temporal vocabulary, yet it is not extensively employed to address the intention formation process of Generation Z members. The following conceptual model will attempt to make sense of this issue.

3. Conceptual Model and Propositions

Building on the integration gap identified above, this section develops the conceptual model. The discussion proceeds in four steps: the theoretical framework is first justified against the limitations of existing models, the integrated model is then introduced, three propositions follow as testable hypotheses for future empirical work, and a final discussion highlights how the model differs from existing approaches in its treatment of intention as a quality construct.

3.1. Theoretical Framework Adopted and Its Justification

The model integrates symbolic consumption theory, self-construction theory, and cultivation theory. This combination is not arbitrary since each of the three dominant traditional models of green consumption has a particular deficiency to address.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) sees intention as the closest behavioral antecedent to be broken down into three components: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. In spite of being quite productive in terms of empirical regularities found in multiple studies (Borah et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024), the theory views the process of forming such an intention as a quasi-simultaneous event, completely disregarding the process of forming an attitudinal disposition through constant media exposure, and does not acknowledge the fact that intention is always different in terms of its stability and strength. In addition to adding a value dimension into the model, the Value-Belief-Norm theory does not pay any attention to other, non-ecological factors of social media, thus ignoring the very processes in question. Norm Activation Theory only focuses on one's moral obligations, while completely disregarding consumption as one's way of establishing one's identity. However,

none of these theories mentions the psychological mechanisms that make the shift from symbolically motivated behavior to an established habit possible.

The above mentioned contributions solve each of these problems in a complementary fashion. Symbolic consumption theory explains the meaning component ignored by functional models of green consumption. Self-construction theory introduces the mechanism missing in attitude-based models of green consumption. Finally, cultivation theory makes up for the temporal element missed in instant models of consumption.

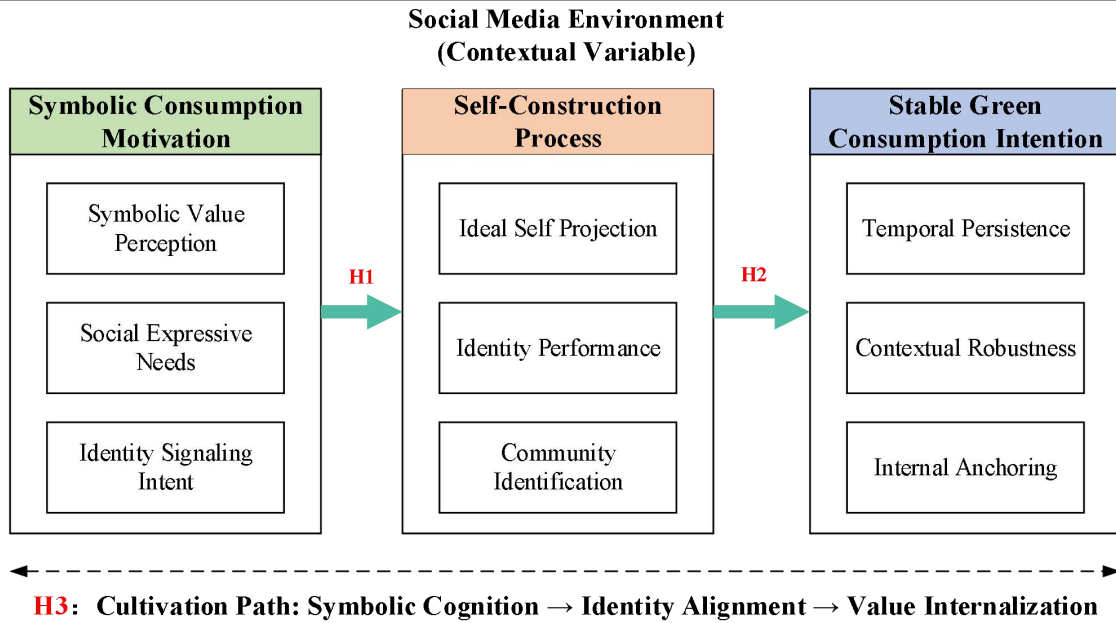
3.2. Model Construction

Building on the theoretical analysis above, this paper proposes an integrated model for the formation of Generation Z's green consumption intention in social media contexts. The model contains one contextual variable—social media exposure—and three core variables: symbolic consumption motivation as the driving force, self-construction as the mediating mechanism, and stable green consumption intention as the outcome. Unlike traditional linear attitude–intention models, the proposed framework treats intention formation as a process unfolding through identity-relevant psychological transformation rather than as the direct expression of attitudinal strength.

The reasonableness of considering these factors as a continuous chain can be explained by the results of recent empirical research on Generation Z and digital consumer behavior. In their investigation of social media influencers, Vilkaite-Vaitone (2024) revealed that identity-related content induces more robust and long-term behavioral reactions than informational content. This finding corroborates the idea that symbolic motivation works as an independent motivational factor. In their study of green communication, Iliopoulou et al. (2024) reported that narrative and emotional framing proved to be more effective than rational appeals. In their study of identity presentation on social media, Skulsuthavong & Wang (2025) showed that identity performance can become psychologically internalized through its recurrent presentation. These studies do not validate the proposed integrative model but demonstrate that each link is empirically sound in related literatures. The proposed model is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Generation Z's Green Consumption Intention Formation



3.3. Core Propositions

Based on the model framework that has been proposed, three key propositions have been formulated to explain the relationships discussed in this paper:

Proposition 1 (Symbolic Value Activation): Exposure to identity-relevant green consumption content on social media activates symbolic consumption motivation among Generation Z consumers. This is particularly true when the content communicates identity-relevant aspects over and above functional aspects. Research on the phenomenon of sustainable consumption facilitated by influencers also supports this hypothesis, suggesting that symbolic and identity frames of sustainable products can be more effective in eliciting consumer response than functional or informational frames (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024). Formulated as a hypothesis, identity-related content of sustainable consumption in social media is expected to have a significant impact on symbolic consumption motivation (H1).

Proposition 2 (Self-Construction Mediation): The effect of symbolic consumption motivation on stable green consumption intention is fully mediated by the self-construction process. Public performance of identity generates commitment pressure, leading to motivational alignment between attitude and behavior, especially when the audience is a significant reference group (Belk, 2013; Giddens, 1991). Studies on identity enactment on social media have shown that performing one's own identity in the presence of an esteemed audience creates a psychological commitment that goes on to mold private attitudes, providing indirect support for the mechanism (Skulsuthavong & Wang, 2025). Hypothesis 2 is formulated as follows: the impact of symbolic consumption motivation on stable green consumption intention is fully mediated by self-construction, meaning that once the mediator

variable is controlled for, symbolic consumption motivation will no longer have a statistically significant effect on stable green consumption intention.

Proposition 3 (Cultivation Path): Stable green consumption intention is constructed progressively by undergoing three stages—symbolic cognition, identity alignment, and value internalization—rather than being influenced solely by any one exposure experience. Proposition 3 corresponds with findings from a recently conducted meta-analysis on the impact of cultivation in social media settings, which shows that the effects occur due to continuous reinforcement of exposure rather than any particular viral moment (Hermann et al., 2023). Thus, Hypothesis 3 suggests that the stability of green consumption intention is positively related to the length of exposure to green consumption content on the part of the audience but not the intensity of any individual exposure experience.

Table 2 below operationally defines some of the key variables used in the hypotheses.

Table 2

Core Variables: Definitions and Dimensions

Variable	Definition	Key Dimensions
Symbolic Consumption Motivation	The drive to engage in consumption behaviors primarily for their symbolic meanings rather than functional utilities	Symbolic perception; expressive Identity intent; value Social needs; signaling
Self-construction Process	The psychological process through which individuals build and maintain their sense of identity via consumption-related activities	Ideal self-projection; Identity performance; Community identification
Stable Green Consumption Intention	Internalized predisposition toward green consumption characterized by: (a) intrinsic rather than external motivation, (b) temporal persistence without continuous reinforcement, (c) contextual robustness regardless of social visibility	Distinguishing feature: intention stability over time and contexts, not intention strength

3.4. Model Characteristics

The proposed model differs from existing literature in three aspects. Whereas traditional attitude-intention models such as the Theory of Planned Behavior overlook the transformation from symbolic motivation to stable intention, this model positions self-construction as a critical mediator. Whereas existing research treats green consumption intention as a unitary concept, this model conceptualizes stable intention formation as a quality-building process. Whereas prior studies view social media merely as a communication channel, this model reconceptualizes it as a field for symbolic expression and identity performance.

This difference forms the main theoretical contribution of the paper. Intention as a quantitative notion is used in most research within the dominant attitude-intention tradition based on the premise that the higher levels of intention will lead to higher behavioral output. The persisting intention-behavior discrepancy demonstrates that this conception is partial. Two equally measured intentions differ drastically in terms of their structural characteristics: one is sustained only externally through social reinforcement while the other is rooted in the self-concept and the individual's identity. These two intentions will represent qualitatively different mental states.

Shifting from the concept of quantitative intentions to qualitative intentions changes the focus of research from the measurement of intentions' strength to the examination of stability, robustness, and internal anchoring. In other words, instead of assessing the strength of intentions, the main points of interest include stability, robustness, and the depth of internal anchoring. These latter concepts represent essential constituents of the quality of intention rather than its consequences.

4. Cultivation Path Analysis

The conceptual model defines self-construction as an intermediary step between symbolic consumption motivation and a solidified intention to consume green. The process involves cumulative cultivation rather than decision making at any one point in time. The three-step process is detailed below.

The analysis undertaken in this section is a conceptual rather than an empirical one. The three steps of the process have been theoretically established via integration of the three models and empirically grounded through the use of application literature from related empirical studies on Generation Z, social media interactions, and identity-driven consumption. However, such literature confirms the existence of each step without conducting a statistical test of the pathway. The empirical validation of the pathway – both in sequence and importance of the intermediary mechanism – is thus seen as a priority for future research, as discussed in the conclusion.

Each step of the process can be defined in terms of a unique psychological process, social media engagement style, and boundary. The three stages correspond to the principle that stable attitudes require integration across cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). They are elaborated in turn below, followed by a synthesis.

4.1. Symbolic Cognition

The first stage, symbolic cognition, lays the meaning foundation for stable green

consumption intention. Social media reshapes how green consumption is mentally categorized, gradually displacing the older framing of "sacrificial environmental responsibility" with a newer framing of "desirable lifestyle marker." Algorithmically delivered visual and narrative content elevates the aesthetic appeal of green consumption, while influencers supply behavioral templates that consumers come to imitate (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024). Through repeated exposure, Generation Z consumers develop cognitive schemas linking green consumption with desirable self-characteristics rather than with moral burden. Recent research on green communication confirms that consumers exposed to narrative and visual sustainability content develop more positive evaluative associations than those exposed to factual content of identical informational substance (Iliopoulou et al., 2024), supporting the claim that this stage operates through aesthetic and narrative restructuring rather than through informational persuasion. The transition marker for this stage is the formation of a stable cognitive schema connecting sustainability to desirable identity.

4.2. Identity Alignment

The formation of cognitive schemas during the first stage is the basis for the second stage, identity alignment, where the practice of green consumption becomes a means of identity demonstration (Yuan, 2024). Generation Z consumers make green consumption part of their self-concept and demonstrate their perfect self through actions that support green principles on various social media platforms. The process of green consumption is facilitated by the likes, comments, and shares function that receives instant feedback from the audience, which validates the demonstrated identity and eventually leads to a negotiation between performing one's identity and being authentic. Such a practice is empirically proved as, over time, young social media users change the way they perceive themselves through the repeated public demonstration of an identity in combination with the validation coming from the audience (Skulsuthavong & Wang, 2025). In other words, it is not a single practice but rather a repeated process of demonstrating oneself publicly on the Internet. The marker for the transition from the previous stage to this one is self-identification as an "eco-conscious consumer."

4.3. Value Internalization

The internalization process can take place via dual channels of automaticity and resolution of cognitive dissonance. Automaticity is developed through repetition, whereby engagement in green consumption becomes an increasingly automatic task. Processing shifts from controlled to habitual over time, requiring progressively fewer cognitive resources. Resolution of cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual repeats a behavioral pattern that represents an identity in public while holding inconsistent attitudes. Such a discrepancy

leads to a discomfort that needs to be solved in favor of changing the attitudes to make them consistent with one's behaviors; public performance becomes a commitment device (Festinger, 1957). As a result of a transition from extrinsic to intrinsic intentions, cross-situational consistency is observed. Even though there is a lack of longitudinal studies of the internalization process in relation to green consumption practices—discussed further—the research shows that public performance of behavior that involves identity causes cognitive alignment, which lasts beyond the initial social setting (Bainotti, 2024). Mechanisms and markers of each stage of the proposed theory of identity-based green consumption are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Three-Stage Cultivation Path: Mechanisms and Characteristics

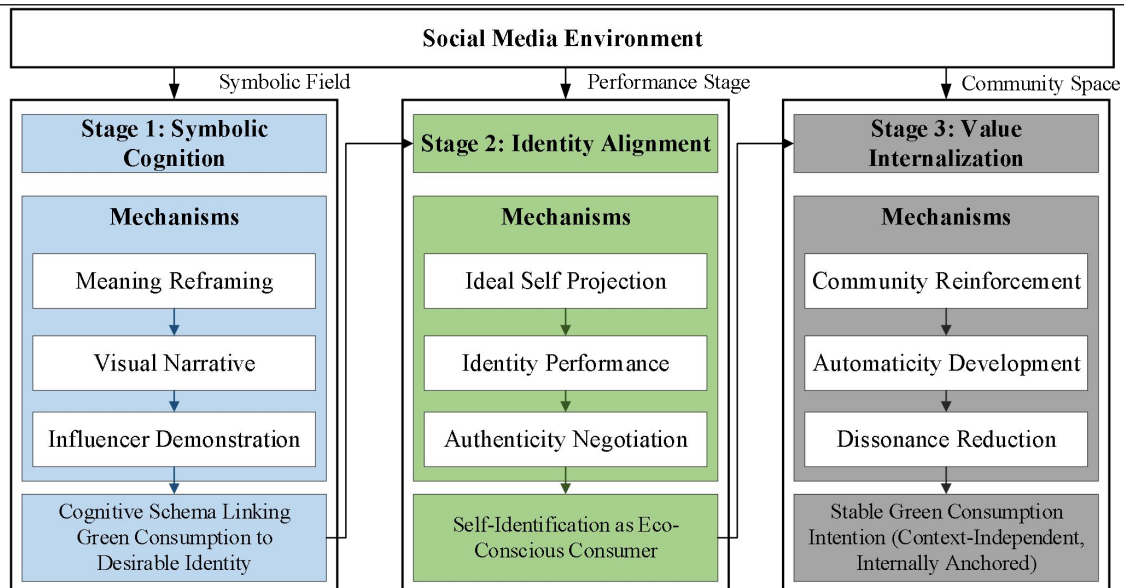
Stage	Core Mechanism	Key Manifestations	Transition Markers
Symbolic Cognition	Meaning reconstruction through visual narrative and emotional resonance	Associating green consumption with positive lifestyle imagery	Formation of cognitive schema linking sustainability to desirable identity
Identity Alignment	Self-concept integration through performative display and social feedback	Active sharing of eco-friendly experiences; Seeking community validation	Self-identification as “eco-conscious consumer”; Stable identity connection
Value Internalization	Attitude-behavior consistency through cognitive dissonance reduction	Cross-situational green behaviors; Reduced need for external validation	Context-independent intention; Intrinsic motivation dominance

4.4. Path Integration

The three stages are interconnected and cumulatively constitute the cultivation process through which stable green consumption intention is formed. The sequence—from cognitive restructuring through identity commitment to value internalization—reflects the established psychological principle that stable attitudes require integration across cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). Symbolic cognition supplies the meaning foundation, identity alignment generates psychological momentum, and value internalization secures behavioral stability. Social media is embedded throughout the process but plays different roles at each stage: it functions as a symbolic field in the first stage, as a performance stage in the second, and as a community space in the third. The three-stage cultivation path is summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Three-Stage Cultivation Path of Green Consumption Intention



5. Conclusion

This paper has sought to solve the structural puzzle that the traditional attitude-intention literature cannot address: why do so many Gen-Z consumers, who express willingness to engage in sustainable consumption, fail to act on their stated intention? This theory suggests a solution through an explanation of processes through which intention is cultivated through symbolic consumption theory, providing reasons for the identification of green consumption through social media; self-construction theory explaining the process through which the meanings of such identification become grounded in the consumer's self-image; and cultivation theory offering the explanation of why the process occurs cumulatively. In combination, these theories allow for a single statement to be made – that stable green consumption intentions are qualitatively different from unstable ones.

The rephrasing of the problem opens a new perspective for research: rather than viewing intention as the unit of quantity measured from survey questions, intention should be recognized as a structured mental state. Its quality and robustness are what should concern researchers, and measurement methods accordingly must shift from the mere quantification towards deeper analysis.

For empirical researchers, this amounts to three research approaches. The first is on the issue of measures – instruments must progress from unidimensional strength scales to multidimensional measures of intention quality, incorporating the variables of stability, robustness in context, and to what extent intention is internal rather than external in nature, which can be tested by examining whether the individual would maintain the intention in question in the absence of social scrutiny. Secondly, in terms of methodological issues, it is clear that cross-sectional designs will not suffice, but longitudinal designs following the

trajectory of Generation Z consumers in their exposures to social media content must be pursued. Lastly, for theoretical testing, the effect of self-construction can be studied via experimental designs in which identity is varied but information is held constant.

Theoretically, the research connects symbolic consumption and green consumption literature, demonstrating the mediating effect of self-construction between motivation and stable intention. By incorporating cultivation theory, it departs from the linear attitude-intention framework and offers a novel paradigm for interpreting how the quality of green consumption intention is constructed.

From a practical standpoint, the theoretical framework provides guidance for three stakeholder groups. Green brands must craft “shareable moments” or consumption practices that allow consumers to demonstrate their commitment to the environment by using distinctive packaging or sustainability narratives. Operators of social media platforms may tailor recommendation engines in a way that promotes sustainability content as identity relevant. Policy makers can capitalize on the symbolic meaning of online spaces to run identity-framed campaigns about sustainable actions.

There are several limitations that could guide future research directions. First, and foremost, the present conceptual paper draws its conclusions through theoretical integration without empirical support. The propositions advanced here can be seen as hypotheses that would have to be tested empirically. Thus, future studies may consider using survey-based structural equation modeling to operationalize H1, H2, and H3. Another limitation of the paper relates to the time frame of the model. In other words, the three-stage process is discussed as being cumulative but cannot be assessed with cross-sectional measures. It would require longitudinal studies that capture the effect of the socialization process in Generation Z cohorts across multiple points of measurement. A final limitation involves the scope of the study: although the framework makes assumptions of internal consistency within Generation Z, there is much diversity in the cohort when comparing different cultural contexts, platforms, and subpopulations.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no Conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

Not applicable.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

All authors have given their consent.

Additional information

Received: 6 February 2026

Accepted: 14 April 2026

Published online: 10 July 2026

Publisher's Note

Wisdom Academic Press Ltd. remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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