INSTANT FOOD, LASTING PLASTIC: A STUDY OF AWARENESS AND BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS IN ONLINE FOOD DELIVERY AMONG GEN Z

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ABSTRACT

India runs on convenience today. Everything shows up at the doorstep, from instant food to 10-minute grocery deliveries. Online food delivery has turned a trend into a significant source of plastic waste through its packaging, most of which is composed of non-recyclable and multi-layered plastics. Gen Z, often known as the more environmentally conscious, is a major segment of the online food delivery industry. This paradox creates a value-action gap. While past research has explored plastic pollution and sustainable consumption, limited studies examine why Gen Z, despite their high awareness, continue to rely on plastic food delivery. This study uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to understand the behavioural factors influencing Gen Z's dependence on plastic-packaged food delivery. The research focused on how attitudes, social norms, perceived behavioural control, and environmental concern shape behavioural intention towards reducing plastic food delivery. A quantitative survey was conducted using a purposive sampling strategy targeting young adults aged 18-28 in Mumbai via a structured questionnaire. SmartPLS 4, using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), was used to analyse the data. The analysis identified that environmental concern is the strongest predictor of Gen Z's intention to reduce plastic use in food delivery, while perceived behavioural control and social norms show moderate positive effects. Attitude is not significant, revealing a value-action gap where positive views do not translate into intention. The findings can help improve app-based nudges, sustainable packaging options, and relevant policies.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behaviour, Online Food Delivery, Gen Z, Environmental Concern, Plastic Pollution, Microplastics, Plastic Awareness, Behavioural Intention.

INTRODUCTION

India generated over 3.9 million tons of plastic waste in 2021-2022, according to the Central Pollution Control Board's (CPCB) annual report released in 2023. Online food delivery packaging is composed of multiple-layered plastics (MLPs) and flexible packaging. In urban India, today ordering food and groceries through apps is turning into the new norm. A report titled How India Eats noted that the online food delivery space is expected to surge faster than the rest of the food industry, estimated to absorb upto 20% of the market share by 2030 (V, 2024).Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1997 and 2012, often referred to as digital natives, who have never experienced a world without smartphones, high-

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speed internet, and social media. Growing up in a hyper-connected digital environment has exposed them to global issues such as climate change, inequality, and environmental degradation, shaping their strong sense of responsibility towards society and the planet, often engaging with eco-friendly trends, low-waste lifestyles, and ethical consumption practices (Wandhe, 2024). Gen Z and younger consumers account for 40% of India's food services consumption, making them one of the key target groups driving the growth of online food delivery as their purchasing power increases (V, 2024).

Plastic waste generated from online food delivery containers is not the only cause for concern; upon examining the composition and breakdown of this packaging, a subtle yet significant threat persists to the environment and human life. The plastic containers commonly used for online food deliveries are often made up of materials like Polypropylene (PP) that degrade easily, releasing microscopic particles directly into food. The very act of placing hot food into these containers significantly accelerates this process, as the thermal impact and manufacturing defects directly lead to the release of plastic particles. (Hu et al., 2023). These plastic particles pose a direct and alarming public health risk. The convenience of online food delivery causes direct human exposure, with a study showing reusable plastic containers, when subjected to daily use, cleaning and heating, can release millions of microplastic and hundreds of billions of nanoplastic particles per square centimetre of container surface (Hussian et al., 2023).

Plastic usage has become both habitual and largely unquestioned despite heightened awareness of environmental issues. Young consumers generate large amounts of plastic waste through their frequent use of delivery platforms, where single-use packaging is embedded into the service model. The ease and speed of digital food services normalise this pattern, creating a form of plastic dependency that operates without conscious reflection. As plastic packaging continues to accumulate in landfills and microplastics enter the food chain, it becomes crucial to study how Gen Z understands these risks and why their behaviour does not align with their eco-conscious values.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Plastic Packaging

Over four million food deliveries are handled every day by India's food delivery sector, according to RedSeer in 2023. The growing use of black plastic containers grew with the takeover of online food delivery and cloud kitchen platforms, leading plastic packaging demand. Black plastic food containers are a hazardous concern due to how they are manufactured and handled in India. Composed of carbon-black pigment, making them invisible to most recycling machines and ending up in landfills or incineration when they technically can be recycled. Most black plastic containers are produced through mixed recycled waste (industrial scraps, e-wastes like flame retardants and heavy metals), making these containers hard to trace and having low quality control. This minor oversight puts a higher risk of contamination and potential chemical leaching when hot, oily or acidic foods come into contact with impure recycled plastics. In a 2022 packaging waste audit by the Centre for Science and Environment, urban cities like Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai are 90% contributors of black plastic containers. Such large-scale processed daily orders and national packaging demand pose a health risk that comes with such cost-cutting plastic containers delivered everywhere (TBP, 2025).

Among Indian students, plastic pollution and microplastic awareness highly correlate with higher educational qualifications and studying Science and related subjects. Being aware of microplastics also makes them more likely to adopt positive attitudes and behaviours needed to actively tackle plastic pollution. External barriers (limited biodegradable options, lack of willingness of sellers to comply with plastic pollution norms and weak enforcement

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laws, etc.) affect pro-environmental behaviours despite high general awareness (Dowarah, Duarah & Devipriya, 2022).

Food Delivery Apps

The young adults, Gen Zs, especially college students, heavily rely on food delivery apps due to convenience, hectic schedules and the challenges of cooking, especially those who live alone, ordering nearly four times more frequently. The main reason behind this ordering behaviour is spontaneity, cravings, stress, or immediate need rather than planned decisions, with dinner being the most common hour to order. Social media also plays a strong role in this, as exposure to food content increases cravings and influences ordering habits rather than pure necessity. Gen Zs frequently switch between apps depending on deals and availability, mainly between Zomato and Swiggy, suggesting their dominance and the convenience-driven nature of food delivery behaviour among these young consumers (Vaidya et al., 2025).

The share of Gen Zs who regularly order food online increased from 64% to 71% signifying that ordering has become a normalised trend, according to ET Snapchat's Gen Z Index 2025. Gen Z's lifestyle revolves around digital convenience, quick delivery, app-based decisions and cravings triggered by what they see online. Food delivery has become a "strong digital habit" with the increased usage of platforms like Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit and Zepto, which have become essential to daily scrolling and consumption (ET, 2025).

Plastic Dependency

Plastic dependency shows up repeatedly as a behavioural pattern built by habits, convenience, and affordability. Habitual dependence on single-use plastics exists despite individuals expressing strong environmental concern (Jallaludin et al., 2021). Consumers continue to favour plastic use because it fits comfortably into their lifestyle, in activities like food delivery, shopping, and on-the-go consumption. This has reinforced the acceptance of plastic bags or passive reception of plastic packaging, overshadowing the conscious intent to be sustainable, as witnessed in Zillenials and their reliance on familiar carry-bag habits, which influence awareness, perceived pressure, and support for bans (Solekah, Handriana & Usman, 2024). Convenience is the driving force of these habits, while plastic remains the easiest and most accessible choice across income groups. Limited affordable alternatives, and the need for greater effort, infrastructure, and upfront cost for reusable options align with evidence that cost, affordability, and poor recycling systems weaken behavioural control among individuals (Jallaludin et al., 2021). These factors collectively contribute to a value-action gap wherein individuals recognise environmental problems but fail to change behaviour when convenience, habits, and structural barriers dominate decision-making (Tao et al., 2025).

Gen Z Consumption Behaviour

Gen Z commonly perceive themselves as eco-conscious, informed, and environmentally responsible and being sustainable forms an important part of their personal identity and expression. On digital platforms, Gen Z expresses enthusiasm for reusable products, aesthetic-led lifestyles, and environmentally aligned branding. Social belonging enhances these choices through peer approval and influencer credibility. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram help shape preferences for reusable items and position them as lifestyle markers (Wulandari & Suhud, 2025). However, Gen Z's digital habits have led to increased plastic dependency through heavy engagement with online food delivery, where plastic packaging is normalised and rationalised. Food-delivery patterns reveal that apathy, scepticism, and limited green information increase moral disengagement. This reinforces the

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intention to depend on plastic despite the awareness of its environmental harm (Tao et al., 2025). Hence, Gen Z's behaviour dynamics reflect tension between their values and actions. Private, convenience-driven behaviours do not receive the same social reinforcement as visible sustainable choices, which contributes to behavioural inconsistency.

Contradictions, therefore, arise in Gen Z's relationship with sustainability. The eco-friendly identity and online advocacy coexist with high plastic consumption in everyday practices among Gen Z. Moral disengagement processes have facilitated these contradictions by enabling individuals to justify their harmful choices when conveniences take over or when consequences feel distant (Tao et al., 2025). Positive attitude towards sustainability does not automatically translate into behaviour, largely due to structural barriers such as poor recycling infrastructure, common across Asian consumer studies where recycling intention is frequently higher than actual behaviour (Jallaludin et al., 2021). Social influences can strengthen sustainable behaviour when it is visible, rewarded, and easy to perform, which explains why subjective norms strongly increase cloth-bag usage among Zillenials (Solekah, Handriana & Usman, 2024) and why reusable tumblers gain traction with peer culture and lifestyle acceptance (Wulandari & Suhud, 2025). When sustainability requires additional effort or cost, many young consumers revert to ingrained habits.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

Originally introduced by Icek Ajzen (1991), the Theory of Planned Behaviour is a social cognition-based theory that examines factors influencing human behaviour, namely attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioural control. It is one of the most used and effective models to predict an individual's behavioural intention in social sciences and psychology.

The TBP has proven to be highly predictive across social science research, especially in the field of sustainable consumption behaviour. TBP is an adaptable foundational model for studying behaviours in various studies as it offers a structured framework and flexibility to explore the factors affecting behaviour (Syed et al., 2024).

TABLE 1. FACTORS OF THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR

Factors	Description	Citation
1.Attitude Towards the Behaviour	An individual's overall positive or negative assessment of performing the behavior is examined by their attitude toward it. It is shaped by behavioral beliefs, which are opinions about how a behavior is likely to turn out and whether or not those results are worthwhile. In TPB, a more favourable attitude leads to a stronger intention to perform the behaviour.	Ajzen, 1991
2. Subjective Norm	The term "subjective norm" describes the perceived social pressure from significant others to engage in or refrain from engaging in a specific behaviour. If social pressure is perceived as strong, intention increases.	Ajzen, 1991
3.Perceived BehaviouralControl (PBC)	PBC records an individual's assessment of how simple or complex the behaviour will be to execute. It is influenced by control beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or hinder performance (e.g., time, resources, skills). PBC influences both intention (when people feel capable, they intend more strongly) and behaviour directly (because it reflects actual control or ability).	Ajzen, 1991
4.Behavioural Intention	Attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control all work together to shape behavioral intention. It shows how much effort a person intends to put into engaging in the behavior or how hard they are willing to attempt.	Ajzen, 1991
5.Environmental concern	Environmental concern refers to the degree to which a person prioritises protecting the environment and reducing pollution. People who are environmentally concerned believe pollution is a serious problem and are willing to support actions or policies that help the environment. The more concerned someone is, the more likely they are to support eco-friendly solutions.	Crosby, Gill &Taylor 1981

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Objectives

- To examine how behavioural intention is influenced by attitudes towards reducing plastic use in online food delivery.
- To analyse how social norms affect behavioural intention to reduce plastic use in online food delivery.
- To determine how perceived behavioural control impacts behavioural intention to reduce plastic use in online food delivery.
- To assess the effect of environmental concern on behavioural intention towards reducing plastic use in online food delivery.

Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between attitudes towards reducing plastic use in food delivery and behavioural intention.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between social norms and behavioural intention to reduce plastic use in food delivery.

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between perceived behavioural control and behavioural intention to reduce plastic use in food delivery.

H4: There is a significant positive relationship between environmental concern and behavioural intention to reduce plastic use in food delivery.

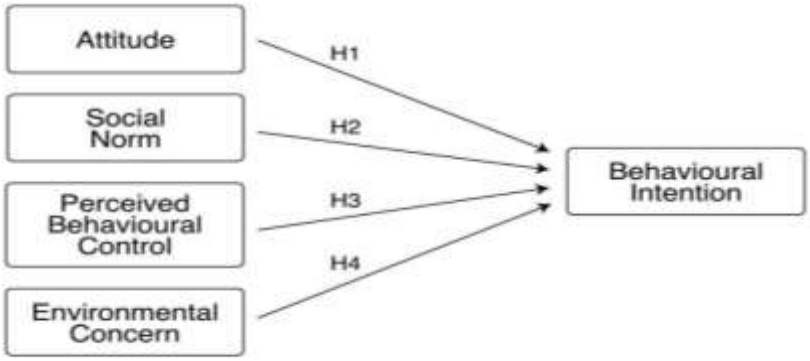

FIGURE 1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative survey using purposive sampling was conducted to study plastic-related awareness and behavioural intentions among Gen Z. The sample included 248 participants aged 18-28 years residing in Mumbai, all of whom were active users of food delivery services Data was collected through an online questionnaire measuring the latent variables, namely attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, environmental concern, and behavioural intention using a 5-point Likert scale. Table 2 outlines these variables and corresponding statements used to measure each construct in the survey. SmartPLS 4, utilising Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), was used for the factor analysis in this study (Wong, 2019; Hussain et al., 2023).

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TABLE 2 LATENT VARIABLES		
Factors	**Code**	**Statements**
Attitude (adapted from Corsini et al., 2024)	AT1	Ordering food in plastic packaging harms the environment.
	AT2	Hot food in plastic containers may affect my health.
	AT3	I feel guilty when I generate a lot of plastic waste from food delivery.
	AT4	Avoiding plastic packaging in food delivery is important to me.
Social Norm (adapted from Corsini et al., 2024)	SN1	My friends/family influence how often I order food online.
	SN2	Most people my age expect me to order food online, even if it comes with plastic packaging.
	SN3	People around me would approve if I chose low-plastic delivery options.
	SN4	My friends/family expect me to choose food delivery options that reduce plastic packaging.
Perceived Behavioural Control (adapted from Corsini et al., 2024)	PBC1	It is difficult to avoid plastic when ordering food online.
	PBC2	I feel I can take actions to reduce plastic use when ordering food online.
	PBC3	I am able to choose restaurants that use low-plastic packaging when ordering online.
	PBC4	I feel I have control over reducing plastic packaging in my food delivery orders.
Environmental Concern (adapted from Corsini et al., 2024)	EC1	I worry about the environmental damage caused by plastic waste.
	EC2	I feel responsible for reducing my contribution towards plastic pollution.
	EC3	Choosing low-plastic delivery options reflects my concern for the environment.
	EC4	I believe that individual actions matter in reducing plastic waste
Behavioural Intention (adapted from Corsini et al., 2024)	BI1	I plan to reduce my use of food delivery that comes with plastic packaging.
	BI2	I intend to choose places that offer sustainable/eco-friendly packaging.
	BI3	I plan to avoid reheating food in plastic containers whenever possible.
	BI4	I am willing to make changes to reduce plastic waste.

Research Question

Why does Gen Z continue to generate plastic waste through online food delivery despite of high environmental awareness?

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This analysis uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour to understand the various factors shaping Gen Z's intentions to reduce plastic use in online food delivery. The analysis shows how each latent variable contributes differently to behavioural intention by examining the

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relationships between attitude, social norms, perceived behavioural control and environmental concern. The findings are interpreted according to Gen Z's lifestyle, digital habits, and environmental values, offering insights into the current value-action gap that characterises their consumption behaviour.

Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the 248 Gen Z respondents who participated in the study. It offers context for interpreting the behavioural patterns identified. The sample was predominantly female (76.2%), with most participants falling in the 18-20 age group, which reflects the younger segment of Gen Z. A limited independent income was indicated as a majority relied on pocket money (59.7%), which may influence their choices regarding sustainable alternatives. Ordering frequency revealed that a large portion (45.2%) of orders were less than a week, showing that food delivery is a regular but not excessively frequent habit for most.

These characteristics help contextualise the behavioural insights, as age, financial dependence, and ordering frequency may shape perceptions of convenience, control, and sustainability in online food delivery.

TABLE 3
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Age	Male	59	23.8
	Female	189	76.2
Gender	18-20	199	14.980.2
	21-23	37	14.9
	24-26	5	2
	27+	7	2.8
Source of Income	Pocket Money	148	59.7
	Internship/Part-time Job	43	17.3
	Full-time Job	24	9.7
	Freelancing	15	6
	Others	18	7.3
Frequency of ordering	Less than once a week	112	45.2
	1-2 times a week	99	39.9
	3-4 times a week	27	10.9
	5 or more times a week	10	4

TABLE 4
STANDARDISED PATH COEFFICIENTS

Path	Std. β	p-value	Supported?
Attitude → Behavioural Intention	0.046	0.385	No
Social Norm → Behavioural Intention	0.153	0.001	Yes
PBC → Behavioural Intention	0.124	0.005	Yes
Environmental Concern → Behavioural Intention	0.617	<0.001	Yes (strong)

Each of the four latent variables had a varying level of influence and significance on behavioural intention to reduce the use of plastic in ordering food online through delivery platforms. Table 4 presents the standardised beta values and p-values, and indicates whether each hypothetical path is supported, providing a clear statistical overview of the strength and significance of each relationship.

Attitude → Behavioural Intention

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- Std. $\beta = 0.046$, $p = 0.385$
- Not supported.

This indicates that attitude does not significantly shape Gen Z's intention to reduce plastic use. Even if individuals feel reducing plastic is good, this positive evaluation alone does not translate into action. Favourable views do not necessarily lead to behavioural intention, suggesting a tendency-behaviour gap, possibly due to convenience overriding concern.

Social Norm → Behavioural Intention

- Std. $\beta = 0.153$, $p = 0.001$
- Supported.

Social norms show a significant positive influence, meaning Gen Z is responsive to peer expectations and societal pressure. Gen Z is more likely to reduce plastic use when friends, family, or influencers advocate sustainable practices. This aligns with the idea that environmental actions are socially driven for this demographic.

Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) → Behavioural Intention

- Std. $\beta = 0.124$, $p = 0.005$
- Supported.

PBC significantly influences intention, implying that Gen Z is more likely to act sustainably when they feel capable and have control, such as access to alternatives, restaurants offering sustainable packaging, or options to avoid plastic. The stronger their perceived ability or ease, the stronger the intention.

Environmental Concern → Behavioural Intention

- Std. $\beta = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$
- Supported (very strong).

Environmental concern is the strongest predictor in the model. This indicates that it is the dominant driver behind Gen Z's intention to reduce plastic use. When individuals are deeply worried about environmental issues, it strongly motivates their intentions, even more than social norms or perceived control.

OVERALL INTERPRETATION

The findings clearly show that environmental concern outweighs all other factors in shaping Gen Z's intentions to reduce plastic use in food delivery. Their genuine worry about environmental degradation and personal awareness of ecological harm strongly motivate them to consider more sustainable choices. In contrast, attitude alone proves insufficient, advocating that only believing sustainability is important does not automatically translate into intention or action. Social influence and perceived behavioural control do contribute to their intention, but to a modest extent. Overall, the demographic appears most willing to adopt sustainable behaviour when they personally care about the environment, feel capable of making such choices, and observe that the people around them also value and support such responsible actions.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the gap between Gen Z's strong environmental awareness and their continued reliance on plastic-heavy online food delivery. Survey results showed that Gen Z orders food regularly, despite knowing the harms of plastic containers, indicating their dependence is habitual, and convenience eventually takes precedence. The findings also reveal that the generation tends to think about sustainability at a macro level, but fails to translate this concern into micro, everyday actions. Within the TPB, environmental concern emerges as the strongest motivator. Attitude alone is insufficient to drive change, while social

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norms have limited influence, hinting that friends and family do not significantly shape behaviour, likely because Gen Z is already environmentally aware. PBC plays a moderate role, though often overshadowed by the ease of digital ordering. Overall, a clear value-action gap is highlighted, fuelled by convenience, routine app usage, and limited sustainable packaging alternatives.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study provides valuable insights about Gen Z's dependency on online food delivery that comes in plastic packaging and their awareness of plastic used in this ecosystem, but certain limitations must be considered. The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, which raises concerns about potential bias. Additionally, the study's scope was restricted to Gen Z individuals within the specific age group of 18-28 based in Mumbai, which restricts how far the findings can be generalised across all ages. It is also contextual in scope, as it focuses specifically on plastic food-delivery containers and examines only app-based food ordering behaviour, rather than the broader spectrum of plastic consumption. It is also possible that respondents who do order frequently online may have been underrepresented in our study. The study relied on self-reported survey data, which may not fully reflect actual. The use of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TBP) helped explain the role of attitudes, norms, perceived control, and environmental consciousness; the model does not capture all possible emotional, contextual or platform-driven influences on the complexity of food ordering behaviour.

Future research can address these concerns by ensuring there is no class imbalance, by specifically focusing on a representative sample of all ages across the generation and concentrating on individuals who are more regular and frequent users of digital food deliveries. Furthermore, studies can look into a sample extending to other cities, age groups, and socio-economic backgrounds for a more comprehensive understanding. Studies can also extend TBP by integrating habit strength, digital app design cues or emotional drivers. Based on these findings, several steps can bridge the gap between value and action. App-based behavioural nudges should be strengthened, such as "no-cutlery needed" defaults, clearer plastic-use disclosures, and maybe reward-based systems for choosing low-plastic orders, which can directly help influence attitudes and perceived control. Food delivery platforms can expand industry-led pilot initiatives, such as that of Zomato and Swiggy's trial runs with sustainable or reusable packaging and scale it to more restaurants. Restaurants can be encouraged to adopt standardised eco-packaging through subsidies or partnering incentives.

Importantly, at the policy level, a stronger implementation of India's Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) rules by the CPCB can push platforms and restaurant owners to systematically track and reduce plastic outputs. Together, these measures can create a system where sustainable choices become easier, more visible, and more convenient for Gen Z consumers.

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Received: 03-Aug-2026, Manuscript No. AMSJ-26-17358; **Editor assigned:** 04-Aug-2026, PreQC No. AMSJ-26-17358(PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Aug-2026, QC No. AMSJ-26-17358; **Revised:** 25-Aug-2026, Manuscript No. AMSJ-26-17358(R); **Published:** 02-Sep-2026

Citation Information: Sharma, G., Shirodkar, N. & Khimasiya, A., (2026). Instant food, lasting plastic: a study of awareness and behavioural intentions in online food delivery among gen z. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal, 30*(4), 1-10.