

Understanding Customer Attitudes Toward Green Products: A Sustainable Marketing Perspective

Mrs. M. Priya¹, Ms. P. R. Shivani²

^{1,2} Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem

Abstract

Growing environmental concerns worldwide have reshaped both consumer behaviour and corporate marketing strategies in fundamental ways. Eco-friendly products have emerged as a practical response to rising environmental degradation, offering consumers and businesses a pathway toward more responsible patterns of production and consumption. This paper examines customer attitudes toward green products through the lens of sustainable marketing, drawing on established behavioural frameworks including the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Value-Belief-Norm model. It investigates key determinants of green purchase intentions — including environmental awareness, price sensitivity, perceived product quality, availability, brand credibility, and social influence — while also accounting for the well-documented intention–behaviour gap. Using a descriptive research design supported by primary data collected through a structured questionnaire and secondary data from peer-reviewed literature, the study maps the attitudinal landscape of consumers in urban and semi-urban contexts. Findings confirm that environmental awareness and brand trust are the strongest predictors of green purchase intention, while affordability and limited distribution remain primary barriers to actual purchase. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for marketers and policymakers seeking to close the gap between positive environmental attitudes and sustainable purchasing behaviour.

Keywords: Eco-Friendly Products, Sustainable Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Green Purchase Intention, Environmental Awareness, Green Branding, Greenwashing, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ethical Consumption, Intention–Behaviour Gap

1. Introduction

Environmental sustainability has moved from a niche academic concern to one of the most pressing policy and business challenges of the twenty-first century. Rapid industrialisation, the proliferation of single-use plastics, unchecked carbon emissions, and the overconsumption of finite natural resources have collectively intensified global crises — from accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss to urban air pollution and freshwater scarcity. These challenges have compelled governments, international

organisations, corporations, and ordinary consumers to reconsider long-held assumptions about growth, consumption, and responsibility.

Within this broader context, the green products market has grown substantially. Businesses across sectors are investing in eco-friendly product lines, sustainable packaging, renewable energy transitions, and circular economy models, both in response to regulatory pressure and in anticipation of shifting consumer demand. The global green technology and sustainability market was valued at approximately USD 13.76 billion in 2022 and is projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate exceeding 20% through 2030, reflecting the scale of commercial and societal interest in sustainable alternatives (Grand View Research, 2023).

Yet despite growing consumer awareness of environmental issues, the relationship between expressed environmental concern and actual purchasing behaviour remains complex and often contradictory. Scholars have consistently documented what is variously termed the 'attitude-behaviour gap' or 'values-action gap' in green consumption research: many consumers who report strong environmental concern do not translate those attitudes into consistent purchases of eco-friendly products (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011). Price premiums, limited retail availability, scepticism about environmental claims, and habitual purchasing routines all contribute to this divergence.

This paper examines customer attitudes toward eco-friendly products within a sustainable marketing framework. It draws on theoretical models of planned behaviour and green consumer behaviour to identify the factors shaping purchase intentions and to explain why intention does not always translate into action. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 develops the theoretical and conceptual framework; Section 3 reviews the relevant literature; Section 4 outlines the research objectives and methodology; Sections 5 and 6 present the key factors influencing consumer attitudes and the principal challenges and opportunities in the eco-friendly market; and the paper concludes with a synthesis of findings and practical recommendations.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding green consumer behaviour requires a multi-theoretical foundation. Three frameworks are particularly relevant to this study: the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, and the concept of sustainable marketing.

2.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour remains one of the most widely applied models in green consumer research. The TPB proposes that behavioural intention — and through it, actual behaviour — is predicted by three constructs: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms (perceived social pressure), and perceived behavioural control (the individual's belief in their capacity to perform the behaviour). In the context of green purchasing, a consumer who holds a positive attitude toward buying eco-friendly products, who perceives that significant others endorse such behaviour, and who feels capable of locating and affording green products is more likely to follow through on a purchase intention. Empirical research consistently supports the applicability of the TPB to green buying decisions (Paul, Modi, & Patel, 2016; Yadav & Pathak, 2017).

2.2 Value-Belief-Norm Theory

The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, developed by Stern et al. (1999), explains pro-environmental behaviour through a causal chain linking personal values (particularly altruistic and biospheric values), environmental beliefs, and sense of obligation. Consumers who hold strong biospheric values — a concern for the natural environment beyond its instrumental use — are more likely to develop ecological worldviews, perceive adverse environmental consequences from non-sustainable consumption, and ultimately experience a personal moral norm to act pro-environmentally. The VBN model has been successfully applied to predict willingness to pay green price premiums and to adopt sustainable consumption habits (Jansson, Marell, & Nordin, 2010).

2.3 Sustainable Marketing

Sustainable marketing, as defined by Peattie and Belz (2010), extends the conventional marketing mix to incorporate long-term ecological and social considerations alongside economic objectives. It involves designing products that minimise environmental impact across their full lifecycle — from raw material extraction and manufacturing to packaging, distribution, use, and end-of-life disposal. Sustainable marketing also encompasses transparent communication practices that build consumer trust, pricing strategies that reduce the accessibility barrier to green products, and distribution approaches that extend the reach of sustainable alternatives. Critically, sustainable marketing rejects greenwashing — the practice of making unsubstantiated or misleading environmental claims — as both ethically indefensible and strategically counterproductive.

3. Review of Literature

The academic literature on green consumer behaviour has expanded considerably over the past three decades. Early foundational work by Polonsky (1994) established green marketing as a distinct field of inquiry, defining it as all activities designed to generate and facilitate exchanges intended to satisfy human needs with minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment. Since then, researchers have examined the antecedents and consequences of green purchasing behaviour from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Environmental awareness and knowledge consistently emerge as significant predictors of green purchasing intentions. Chan (2001) demonstrated among Chinese consumers that ecological knowledge, attitudes toward the environment, and ecological affect jointly explained purchase intention for environmentally friendly products. Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo (2001) identified that consumers willing to pay a premium for green products tend to be women, slightly older, married with at least one child, and hold stronger beliefs about the importance of environmental protection. These demographic and attitudinal patterns have been replicated in various cultural contexts, though with notable variation.

Price sensitivity is one of the most robustly documented barriers to green purchasing. Follows and Jobber (2000) tested a consumer model of environmentally responsible purchase behaviour and found that while environmental values predicted intentions, economic considerations frequently moderated the relationship between intention and actual behaviour. Peattie (2001) characterised the search for the mainstream green consumer as elusive, noting that the majority of consumers who express pro-

environmental attitudes revert to price and convenience as primary decision criteria at the point of purchase.

Brand credibility and greenwashing scepticism have grown as research themes alongside the expansion of corporate environmental communication. Pickett-Baker and Ozaki (2008) found that consumers are increasingly suspicious of environmental marketing claims, and that trust — in both the product and the company making environmental assertions — is a critical mediating variable between environmental attitude and purchase behaviour. The damaging effects of greenwashing on consumer trust and brand equity have been documented across multiple industries (de Jong, Harkink, & Barth, 2018).

Research on Indian and other emerging market consumers presents a nuanced picture. Jaiswal and Kant (2018) applied and extended the TPB in the Indian context, finding that environmental concern, social influence, and green trust all significantly predict green purchase behaviour, but that infrastructure limitations and higher price perceptions act as substantial constraints. Yadav and Pathak (2017) similarly confirmed the applicability of the TPB among Indian consumers and found that willingness to pay for green products was positively correlated with environmental knowledge and negatively correlated with perceived unavailability.

The role of social influence has been explored extensively, particularly in relation to generational differences. Younger consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, demonstrate stronger pro-environmental values and greater receptivity to green branding, partly because sustainable consumption has become a marker of social identity and ethical self-presentation in these cohorts (Ottman, 2011). Social media and digital platforms amplify peer-to-peer dissemination of environmental norms, creating feedback loops that can accelerate the normalisation of green consumption behaviours.

4. Research Objectives and Methodology

4.1 Objectives of the Study

The present study is undertaken with the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the level of environmental awareness among consumers and its influence on green purchase intention.
2. To analyse customer attitudes toward eco-friendly products across demographic groups.
3. To identify the principal factors — including price, quality, availability, and brand trust — that drive or inhibit green purchasing decisions.
4. To examine the nature and extent of the intention–behaviour gap in green consumption.
5. To propose evidence-based recommendations for improving green marketing strategy and policy interventions.

4.2 Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive research design. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 120 respondents in urban and semi-urban areas of Tamil Nadu, India. The questionnaire was developed drawing on established scales from the green consumer behaviour literature, including items adapted from Chan (2001), Laroche et al. (2001), and Yadav and Pathak (2017).

Statements measured environmental awareness, price sensitivity, quality perception, availability perception, brand trust, social influence, and purchase intention. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' (1) to 'Strongly Agree' (5).

Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, books, and institutional reports including publications from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank, and the Bureau of Indian Standards. Quantitative data were analysed using percentage analysis, mean score calculations, and reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha). The overall reliability coefficient for the purchase intention scale was 0.81, indicating good internal consistency. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation across age groups (18–55 years), genders, and educational levels.

5. Factors Influencing Customer Attitudes Toward Eco-Friendly Products

5.1 Environmental Awareness and Knowledge

Environmental awareness — defined as an individual's understanding of ecological issues and sensitivity to the consequences of human activity on the natural world — is consistently the strongest attitudinal predictor of green purchase intention (Chan, 2001; Yadav & Pathak, 2017). Respondents in the present study who demonstrated higher scores on the environmental knowledge scale also reported significantly stronger intentions to purchase eco-friendly products. This relationship held even after controlling for income and age, suggesting that targeted awareness-raising initiatives can shift purchasing intentions across diverse demographic groups.

Multiple channels contribute to environmental awareness formation. Formal education introduces ecological concepts early, while media campaigns — including documentary films, public service advertisements, and social media content — sustain and deepen awareness across adulthood. A particularly notable finding in the present study is the role of social media: respondents who reported regular engagement with environmental content on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube scored significantly higher on both the environmental knowledge and purchase intention scales. This finding aligns with broader evidence that digital peer networks amplify pro-environmental norms, particularly among younger cohorts.

5.2 Price Sensitivity and the Affordability Constraint

Despite positive environmental attitudes, price remains the most commonly cited barrier to green purchasing. The economics of sustainable production — which frequently involves certified raw materials, lower-volume manufacturing, and eco-friendly packaging — typically result in higher unit costs compared to conventional alternatives. In the present study, 68% of respondents agreed that green products are more expensive than their conventional equivalents, and 54% indicated that price was the primary factor that had prevented them from making a green purchase that they had otherwise intended.

This finding is consistent with Laroche et al. (2001), who documented that while many consumers are willing in principle to pay a price premium for eco-friendly products, the acceptable premium threshold is limited — typically in the range of 5–10% above the conventional product price. Strategies to address the affordability constraint include economies of scale in green production, government fiscal incentives (tax concessions, green subsidies), and retailer-led price equalisation schemes. The Indian government's

initiatives under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) labelling schemes represent institutional efforts in this direction.

5.3 Perceived Quality and Product Performance

Green products face a persistent perception challenge: many consumers associate sustainability with compromises in product performance, durability, or sensory quality. This perception, even when inaccurate, constitutes a real barrier to trial and repeat purchase. Pickett-Baker and Ozaki (2008) demonstrated that product performance expectations are a critical mediating variable — consumers who perceive eco-friendly products as functionally equivalent to conventional alternatives are significantly more likely to purchase them, even at a modest price premium.

Companies addressing this perception gap have found success through credible third-party certification (e.g., Ecomark, BIS Green Mark in India; ISO 14001 internationally), consumer education programmes emphasising ingredient transparency, and in-store trial opportunities. Positive consumption experiences are particularly powerful drivers of repeat purchase and word-of-mouth advocacy: in the present study, 71% of respondents who had previously purchased eco-friendly personal care or household products reported high satisfaction and stated an intention to repurchase.

5.4 Availability and Distribution Infrastructure

Availability is a structural determinant of purchase behaviour that operates independently of consumer attitude. A consumer who holds strong pro-environmental attitudes but cannot easily locate eco-friendly alternatives at their habitual retail touchpoints is unlikely to change purchasing behaviour. Ritter et al. (2015) found that distribution breadth — the degree to which green products are accessible across mainstream retail channels rather than confined to specialist stores — is a significant predictor of actual (rather than merely intended) green purchasing.

In the Indian context, the urban–rural divide in green product availability is pronounced. Urban consumers in metro and Tier-1 cities typically have access to eco-friendly products through organised retail chains, modern supermarkets, and e-commerce platforms. Respondents in semi-urban areas in the present study reported substantially greater difficulty locating green alternatives, with 62% indicating that limited retail availability had deterred a green purchase in the preceding twelve months. E-commerce has partially addressed this gap, and platforms such as Amazon's Climate Pledge Friendly filter and dedicated green retail portals have expanded reach — but last-mile logistics and consumer digital access remain constraints.

5.5 Brand Credibility, Green Claims, and the Greenwashing Problem

Brand trust is a critical mediating variable in green purchasing decisions. When consumers perceive a brand's environmental claims as credible, the positive relationship between environmental attitude and purchase intention is strengthened; when they are sceptical, this relationship is attenuated or reversed (de Jong et al., 2018). The greenwashing phenomenon — whereby companies make exaggerated, misleading, or entirely unsubstantiated environmental claims — is a well-documented threat to consumer trust in the green products category.

In the present study, 59% of respondents expressed some degree of scepticism about environmental claims made in product advertising, and 43% indicated that they actively sought third-party certification before purchasing an eco-friendly product. This finding underscores the commercial importance of verifiable, independently certified sustainability credentials. Standardised eco-labelling systems, mandatory environmental claim disclosure requirements, and penalties for greenwashing — such as those now being developed under the EU's Green Claims Directive — are institutional mechanisms that strengthen the green market's credibility infrastructure.

5.6 Social Influence, Cultural Norms, and Generational Dynamics

The social dimension of green consumption is multifaceted. Ajzen's (1991) TPB identifies subjective norms — the perceived expectations of significant social referents — as a distinct predictor of behavioural intention, separate from personal attitude. In practice, consumers are more likely to purchase green products when they perceive that family members, peers, or wider social networks regard sustainable consumption as a desirable norm. This 'social proof' dynamic is especially salient among younger consumers, for whom green consumption has become strongly associated with social identity and values expression.

Generational differences in green purchasing are substantive and well-documented. Ottman (2011) observes that millennial and Gen Z consumers approach consumption choices as expressions of personal ethics, and that brand alignment with environmental values is a significant driver of brand loyalty in these cohorts. In the present study, respondents in the 18–30 age group scored the highest on both environmental concern and green purchase intention scales, while those above 45 showed stronger weight on price and familiarity. These findings have clear implications for marketing segmentation and communication strategies.

6. Challenges, Opportunities, and Findings

6.1 Principal Challenges

The principal challenges confronting the mainstream adoption of eco-friendly products can be grouped into three categories: economic, informational, and infrastructural. On the economic dimension, higher production costs and corresponding retail price premiums remain the most powerful deterrents, particularly for lower-income consumer segments. On the informational dimension, greenwashing scepticism erodes trust across the category, not merely toward the offending brands — a negative externality that the entire green products industry bears. The absence of a universally understood and credible eco-labelling standard in the Indian market amplifies this problem.

The infrastructural dimension encompasses both distribution gaps — particularly the limited reach of green products in Tier-2 cities, semi-urban areas, and rural markets — and waste management constraints. The environmental value proposition of biodegradable or recyclable products is substantially diminished in contexts where appropriate disposal and recycling infrastructure does not exist. Addressing this requires coordinated investment in municipal solid waste management, reverse logistics systems for packaging recovery, and consumer education on responsible disposal practices.

6.2 Opportunities

The same environmental imperatives that create challenges for the green products market also generate significant commercial opportunities for businesses that position themselves early. The intersection of rising middle-class incomes, growing environmental literacy, expanding e-commerce infrastructure, and increasingly active regulatory environments creates a structural tailwind for sustainable commerce in India and similar emerging markets. Businesses that can solve the affordability challenge — through scale, innovation, or business model redesign — stand to capture large and loyal customer segments.

International trade also offers growing incentives for green product adoption. Export-oriented businesses increasingly face environmental compliance requirements from trading partners in the EU, North America, and Japan. The EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), phased in from 2026, will impose carbon costs on energy-intensive exports that do not meet European environmental standards. Indian manufacturers investing in green production now will be better positioned to absorb this regulatory shift and to access premium export markets that prioritise environmental certification.

6.3 Summary of Key Findings

The study's empirical findings confirm several propositions from the literature while also revealing context-specific patterns. Environmental awareness emerged as the strongest predictor of green purchase intention, consistent with Chan (2001) and Yadav and Pathak (2017). Price sensitivity was confirmed as the primary barrier to converting intention into purchase behaviour, with the majority of respondents identifying a price premium beyond 10% as a deterrent. Brand credibility and third-party certification emerged as trust-building mechanisms that significantly attenuated greenwashing scepticism. Social influence was a stronger predictor of purchase intention among younger respondents than among older ones.

The intention–behaviour gap was confirmed as a structural feature of the green products market in the study context: 78% of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward eco-friendly products and 65% reported purchase intentions, but only 41% had made a green purchase in the preceding six months. This gap of approximately 24 percentage points between intention and behaviour represents both the central challenge and the central opportunity for sustainable marketing practice.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for marketers, policymakers, and researchers. For businesses, the priority should be cost reduction through scale and supply chain innovation, combined with investment in credible third-party certification and transparent environmental communication. Marketing campaigns should be designed to close the intention–behaviour gap by reducing friction at the point of purchase — including through product placement in mainstream retail channels, in-store education, and competitive pricing. Digital marketing, particularly social media strategies targeting younger consumers, should emphasise social identity and values alignment alongside product performance.

For policymakers, the recommended agenda includes extending and deepening green fiscal incentives (production subsidies, consumer tax rebates), investing in recycling and waste management infrastructure, and developing and enforcing robust anti-greenwashing regulations with credible penalty

structures. Educational integration of environmental literacy across school curricula would build long-term awareness capital in the consumer population. For researchers, future work should employ longitudinal designs to track the evolution of the intention–behaviour gap over time, and should engage with the emerging literature on digital nudging and choice architecture as mechanisms for converting green intentions into green purchases.

7. Conclusion

Eco-friendly products occupy an increasingly important position in the contemporary marketplace, driven by regulatory pressure, corporate sustainability commitments, and a genuine shift in consumer values — particularly among younger generations who regard ethical consumption as inseparable from identity. The evidence from this study and from the wider literature confirms that customer attitudes toward green products are broadly positive and that environmental awareness is a robust predictor of purchase intention.

Yet the green consumer revolution that environmentalists and sustainable businesses have long anticipated has not yet arrived in its full form. The intention–behaviour gap remains wide, and the barriers that maintain it — price premiums, distribution constraints, greenwashing scepticism, and habitual purchasing routines — are deeply embedded. Closing this gap requires not only better marketing and better products, but structural interventions in pricing, infrastructure, and regulation that change the choice architecture within which consumers make decisions.

The future of sustainable commerce will be shaped by those businesses and policymakers that take the intention–behaviour gap seriously — not as a marketing problem to be managed with better communications, but as a systemic challenge that demands coordinated action across industry, government, and civil society. Green products that are genuinely sustainable, honestly marketed, affordably priced, and readily available represent not merely a commercial opportunity, but a necessary contribution to the long-term preservation of planetary and human wellbeing.

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