

Sustainability as a Determinant Factor in the Purchasing Decision

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of sustainability as a determinant factor in purchasing decisions, focusing on how Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)-related claims influence consumer behavior and brand performance. By employing a qualitative research methodology, the analysis synthesizes insights from academic literature and industry reports to explore the interplay between sustainability marketing practices and consumer decision-making. Key findings reveal that environmental concerns, green willingness to purchase, and long-term sustainability perceptions are critical drivers of green purchasing behavior. Additionally, the relationship between the number of ESG-related claims and product growth demonstrates the importance of multifaceted ESG strategies in enhancing consumer trust and loyalty. This research highlights the transformative potential of integrating sustainability into marketing strategies, providing actionable insights for businesses aiming to align with consumer demand for sustainable products.

Key words: sustainability, marketing, ESG, consumer behavior

J.E.L. classification: Q01, O44, M31

1. Introduction

The growing global emphasis on environmental conservation and social equity has positioned sustainability as a critical factor in modern business strategies and consumer behavior. Companies are increasingly pressured to adopt sustainable marketing practices, not only as a response to environmental and social concerns but also as a means to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving market. These practices involve integrating ecological, social, and ethical considerations into marketing strategies to ensure long-term societal well-being while addressing consumer demands.

Increasing apprehensions regarding global sustainability have prompted vigorous discussions and initiatives across all industries, with marketing significantly impacting both the issues and possible resolutions. Recent decades have experienced unparalleled economic expansion, innovation, and wealth; nevertheless, they have also resulted in detrimental consequences such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, biodiversity loss, and various other environmental issues. Conventional marketing paradigms have encouraged excessive resource use, whereas sustainability marketing emphasizes resource conservation and regenerative utilization.

Consumers play a pivotal role in shaping these sustainable practices through their purchasing decisions. By choosing sustainable brands, consumers send a strong message to businesses, encouraging them to align their strategies with sustainability goals. This shift in consumer behavior reflects a growing awareness of the environmental and social impacts of their consumption patterns and highlights the importance of informed decision-making. As more consumers prioritize sustainable products, companies are compelled to innovate, reduce environmental footprints, and promote ethical practices across their supply chains.

The interplay between sustainable marketing practices and consumer behavior forms a dynamic feedback loop. On the one hand, businesses adopting sustainable marketing can influence consumer preferences by demonstrating their commitment to environmental and social responsibility. On the other hand, consumer choices drive companies to further embed sustainability into their core strategies. Companies are embracing the ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) framework that has emerged as being a crucial component of their management strategy, enabling companies to measure and assess their impact on the planet, people, and their governance practices. This reciprocal relationship underscores the transformative potential of consumer behavior in fostering sustainability at both micro (individual) and macro (societal) levels.

Consumer advocacy is essential in fostering sustainable practices, which are vital for combating the negative effects of over-consumption. Advocacy organizations shape public policy, corporate strategy, and individual actions by increasing knowledge, promoting sustainable practices, and ensuring corporate accountability for environmental consequences. The emergence of digital platforms poses problems and opportunities for consumer advocacy, necessitating further research to identify optimal methods for digital advocacy in fostering sustainable behavior, prompting companies to act accordingly and adopt sustainable practices.

This research paper explores the role of sustainability as a determinant factor in purchasing decisions and its implications for sustainable marketing. By examining the motivations behind consumer choices and the responses of companies to these preferences, this study aims to highlight the importance of a synergistic approach where both businesses and consumers actively contribute to the global sustainability agenda.

2. Literature review

Sustainability has become an integral concept across various domains, including marketing (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Scholars such as Connelly (2007), Davidson (2014), and McDonagh & Prothero (2014) have debated its definitions within marketing, questioning whether the field can genuinely align with sustainability due to its reliance on continuous consumption, which conflicts with ecological limits (Jones et al., 2008; Peattie & Peattie, 2009; Sandberg & Polsa, 2015). Despite being criticized as the antithesis of sustainability (Jones et al., 2008; Lim, 2016), marketing holds the potential to foster sustainable lifestyles and promote eco-friendly products (Peattie & Peattie, 2009; Charter et al., 2002).

Ecological marketing, emerging in the 1970s, primarily addressed environmental hazards such as pollution and synthetic pesticides, with businesses like The Body Shop incorporating environmental values into their mission (Peattie, 2001; Van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996). By the 1980s, green marketing had gained traction, responding to the demand from 'green consumers' and creating new markets (Peattie, 2001). However, green marketing faced criticism for overstating environmental claims, leading to consumer skepticism and exposing an attitude-behavior gap (Crane, 2000; Peattie, 2001). While ecological marketing emphasized ethics, green marketing was driven by consumer demand, yet both overestimated consumer willingness to pay premiums for eco-friendly products and producers' capacities to create them (Van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996).

Sustainability marketing, evolving from ecological and green marketing, seeks to redefine marketing's role, advocating for radical changes in consumption and production patterns (Peattie, 2001). Introduced by Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), sustainability marketing has been conceptualized in environmental and holistic frameworks (Fuller, 1999; Belz & Peattie, 2010), addressing socio-ecological issues at the beginning of the marketing process (Belz & Peattie, 2010). Fuller (1999) defines it as a process meeting customer needs, achieving organizational goals, and aligning with ecosystems. Scholars view sustainability marketing as a convergence of social, ethical, and green marketing, emphasizing long-term relationships and institutional transformation (Belz & Peattie, 2010; Gordon et al., 2011).

In contemporary contexts, green marketing plays a crucial role in minimizing environmental impact and fostering sustainable growth (Boztepe, 2012; Parhizgar & Vesal, 2016). Increasing consumer awareness has amplified scrutiny of production and promotional practices (Ferreira et al., 2023), necessitating investments in green marketing to meet consumer expectations and promote sustainable futures (Gomes et al., 2023). Green purchasing decisions (GPD) serve as a means for

consumers to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable development, highlighting the growing alignment between sustainability marketing and consumer priorities.

3. Research methodology

To investigate the role of sustainability as a determinant factor in purchasing decisions, this research employs a qualitative approach, emphasizing the analysis of existing literature and industry reports. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between sustainability and consumer purchasing behavior, as well as the implications for sustainable marketing practices. The following steps outline the research process:

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring the complex relationship between sustainability and consumer behavior. The research aims to synthesize existing knowledge from diverse sources, offering an integrative perspective on the topic.

The research relies on secondary data sources, including: peer-reviewed journal articles were selected from international academic databases; these articles provide insights into sustainability concepts, consumer decision-making processes, and sustainable marketing practices. Reports from specialized organizations, such as McKinsey and Nielsen, were analyzed to understand market trends, consumer preferences, and corporate strategies related to sustainability. Articles and reports published within the past 10 years, focusing on sustainability, consumer behavior, and sustainable marketing practices, were included. Studies with a global or regional focus relevant to the topic were prioritized. A systematic review was conducted to extract and synthesize relevant themes from the selected literature and reports. Key topics, such as consumer motivations for choosing sustainable brands, the impact of sustainability on marketing strategies, and the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR), were identified and analyzed.

This methodological framework enables a thorough examination of sustainability as a determinant factor in purchasing decisions. By synthesizing insights from academic and industry sources, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how sustainability influences consumer behavior and informs sustainable marketing practices.

4. Findings

Research indicates that environmental issues considerably influence customers' buying choices (Chen et al. 2022). Chen et al. (2022) conducted research on the influence of environmental concerns on customers' purchasing decisions on green items. This study identified five key elements that influence this behavior. The authors discovered that consumers with heightened environmental concerns are more inclined to engage in eco-friendly shopping behaviors (Chen et al. 2022). Research by Zhang and Dong (2020) indicates that individual characteristics, particularly environmental knowledge and awareness, significantly influence green purchasing behavior. Zhang and Dong (2020) assert that persons possessing more awareness of environmental issues are more inclined to make sustainable purchase decisions. A study conducted by Zhuang et al. (2021) further corroborates the notion that environmental knowledge is crucial in shaping consumer behavior. The authors discovered that as customers acquire environmental information, they increasingly focus on acquiring eco-friendly products, so reinforcing the notion that environmental concerns substantially influence consumers' purchasing choices (Zhuang et al. 2021). The studies present persuasive evidence that environmental concerns significantly impact consumer behavior; thus, companies that tackle these issues with eco-friendly products and sustainable practices are more likely to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers (Gomes et al. 2023).

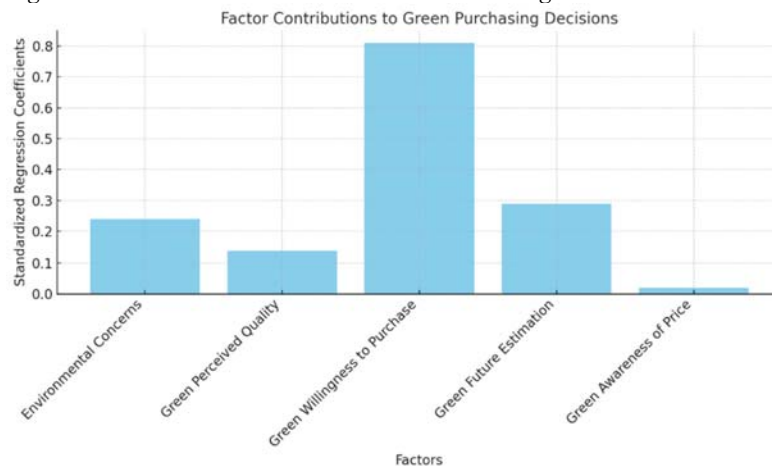
Green purchasing decisions are influenced by multiple factors, including environmental considerations, perceived green quality, and willingness to engage in green purchasing. Additional crucial factors encompass projections for a sustainable future in green marketing, consumer understanding regarding pricing, and perceived advantages of eco-friendly products. These aspects influence consumers' comprehensive green purchasing decisions, illustrating the intricate relationship among individual awareness, attitudes, and future expectations concerning sustainable products (Lopes et al. 2024). These elements influence consumer behavior concerning environmentally conscious shopping choices (Ogiemwonyi et al. 2023).

Various factors influence consumer attitudes and behaviors about eco-friendly items, hence affecting their green purchasing choices. A thorough review by Zhang and Dong (2020) identifies personal values, environmental awareness, social norms, and product features as the primary factors affecting customers' green purchasing behavior. Joshi and Rahman (2015) delineate the primary motives, facilitators, and obstacles affecting the decision to acquire green products, encompassing price, availability, and perceived quality. Therefore, comprehending these elements is essential for enterprises to proficiently promote their eco-friendly products to consumers and stimulate sustainable purchasing behavior. Eco-friendly items hold significant social value and can influence consumers' behavior towards more sustainable purchase choices. Parker et al. (2023) assert that emotional and social values are essential in the formation of GPD. Zhuang et al. (2021) found that customers' propensity to buy eco-friendly products is affected by both personal traits and the social environment, including the influence of others. Dikici et al. (2022) identified a significant association between consumers' values concerning green consumption and their green purchasing behavior. Consequently, highlighting the social and environmental advantages of green products can motivate customers to engage in more sustainable purchasing choices (Alam et al. 2024; Nekmahmud et al. 2022; Reddy et al. 2023).

In response to escalating environmental concerns, corporations are increasingly adopting green marketing techniques and encouraging eco-friendly purchase decisions to satisfy consumer demand for sustainable products and services. Peripheral regions, frequently neglected in sustainability discourse, provide a distinct chance to establish themselves as frontrunners in ecologically responsible activities via green marketing methods. This is a chance to enhance economic growth while safeguarding the environment for future generations.

The study we will be referring to investigates the determinants of green purchasing decisions (GPD) in Portugal, a peripheral European region. The key factors assessed include environmental concerns (EC), green perceived quality (GPQ), green willingness to purchase (GWP), green future estimation (GFE), green awareness of price (GAP), and green perceived benefits (GPB). We considered the scientific work developed by the research team consisting of Lopes et al. (2024) as having a significant contribution related to the research field. Next, we will highlight the most important data obtained from the study.

Figure no. 1 Factor contribution to Green Purchasing Decisions



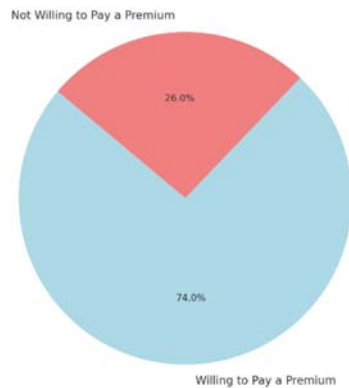
Source: Lopes et al.(2024)

The study reveals that environmental concerns have a moderate contribution to green purchasing decisions, indicating that individuals who are environmentally conscious are more likely to make green purchases. Companies targeting environmentally conscious consumers should emphasize the environmental benefits of their products (e.g., reduced carbon footprint, use of sustainable materials). Green Willingness to Purchase (GWP) is the largest contributing factor, according to the researchers, suggesting that an individual's intrinsic willingness and motivation to support green products are the most significant determinants of green purchasing behavior. Businesses can leverage this by

appealing to consumers’ willingness through campaigns that emphasize personal impact and benefits of buying green products. Green Future Estimation has a notable contribution on green purchasing decision among consumers, indicating that individuals who believe in the future benefits of green purchasing or perceive long-term sustainability as essential are likely to engage in such behavior. Brands can highlight the forward-looking benefits of green purchases, such as conserving resources for future generations or mitigating environmental crises.

Green Awareness of Price holds the smallest impact, indicating that price sensitivity in the context of green purchasing may not significantly deter individuals. However, it is still a factor to consider for cost-conscious consumers. While price awareness matters, companies should focus more on other factors such as promoting environmental and future benefits to justify premium pricing for green products.

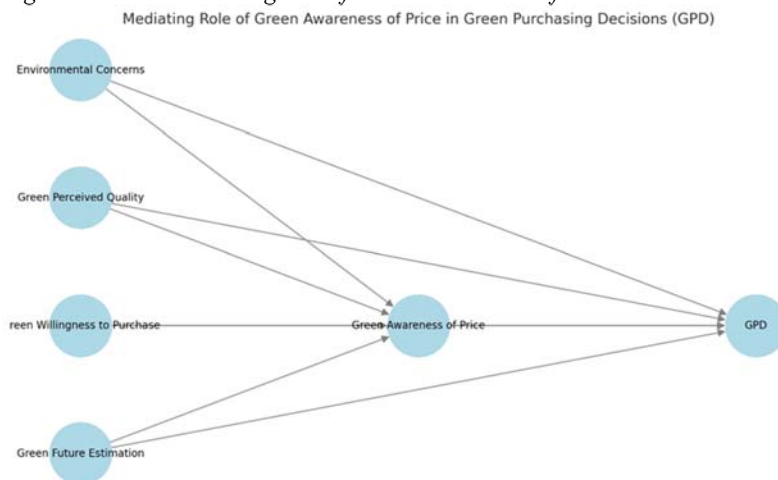
Figure no. 2 Consumer Willingness to Pay a Premium for Green Products



Source: Lopes et al.(2024)

As we can observe, a significant majority (74%) are willing to pay more, reflecting an optimistic outlook for green product adoption when value and benefits are well-communicated. Businesses should drive home the point that environmentally friendly products are of superior quality and offer several advantages to the environment. It is possible to further strengthen GPQ by establishing confidence through certifications and using manufacturing procedures that are transparent.

Figure no. 3 The mediating role of Green Awareness of Price in Green Purchasing Decisions (GPD)

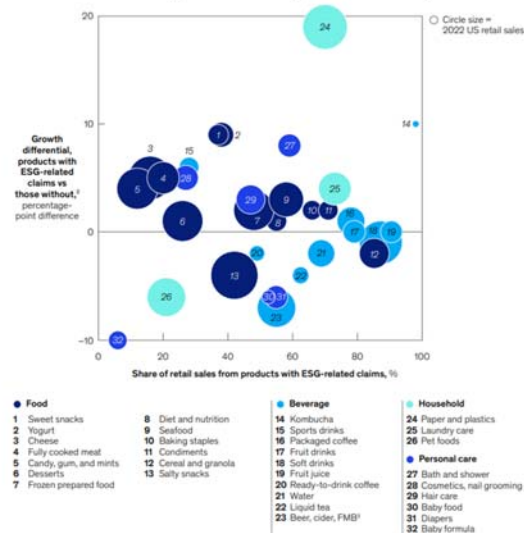


Source: Lopes et al.(2024)

This diagram illustrates the mediating role of "Green Awareness of Price" (GAP) in influencing Green Purchasing Decisions (GPD). The arrows indicate both direct and mediated relationships among key factors, emphasizing how GAP connects variables like "Environmental Concerns" and "Green Perceived Quality" to GPD. GAP does not directly predict GPD; however, it does play a significant role in mediating the relationship between the two by amplifying the impacts of other parameters such as GPB, GPQ, and EC among others. Despite the fact that it is theoretically significant, GPB had a limited direct influence in this context. This highlights the necessity of increasing the clarity of communication regarding the tangible benefits of environmentally friendly substances. One of the most important aspects of pricing awareness is that, despite the fact that GAP does not have any direct influence, its role as a mediator magnifies the influence of other variables. This demonstrates the importance of developing tactics that can justify premium pricing by educating consumers about the cost-benefit dynamics and the long-term savings attainable.

In the continuation of the research, we will analyze a joint report McKinsey and NielsenIQ(2023) which analyzes the correlation between companies that incorporate ESG-related claims to their products sales and sales growth. We focused on the key findings of growth differential between different product categories, customer loyalty and sales growth.

Figure no. 4 Growth differential vs prevalence of ESG-related claims by product category



Source: McKinsey&NielsenIQ(2023)

The analysis presented in the graphs delineates the growth dynamics of products with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)-related claims compared to those without such claims across various product categories. Notably, the Paper and Plastics category (Category 24) exhibits a remarkable growth differential of approximately 20% alongside a substantial retail sales share of around 90%, indicating a strong consumer resonance with ESG claims, particularly in sustainable packaging.

Similarly, Kombucha (Category 14) demonstrates a significant growth differential, attributed to its appeal among health-conscious and environmentally aware consumers. Other categories, including Bath and Shower (27), Cosmetics and Nail Grooming (28), and Laundry Care(25), reveal moderate growth differentials of about 5% but maintain high retail sales shares of 70-80%. This suggests a consistent consumer alignment with ESG claims, likely driven by the personal nature of these products and their ethical production associations. In contrast, categories such as Pet Foods (26), Hair Care (29), and Diapers (31) show low prevalence of ESG claims yet positive growth differentials, indicating potential for expansion in ESG-related messaging.

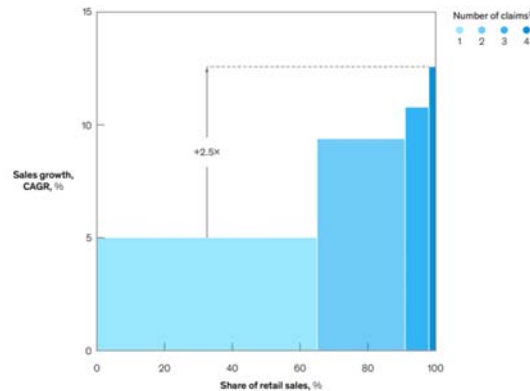
Figure no. 5 Growth of sales rate and loyalty measurement from products with ESG-related claims



Source: McKinsey&NielsenIQ(2023)

Furthermore, the correlation between the share of sales from ESG-related claims and brand repeat purchase rates underscores the positive impact of ESG commitment on customer loyalty. Brands categorized by their ESG engagement levels reveal that those with a Moderate (20-50%) to High (51-80%) share of ESG claims experience significant increases in repeat purchase rates, suggesting a threshold effect where consumer trust and loyalty are maximized when ESG claims dominate a brand's offerings.

Figure no. 6 Sales growth vs share of retail sales by number of ESG-related claims made by a product (US)



Source: McKinsey&NielsenIQ(2023)

Lastly, the relationship between the number of ESG-related claims and the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) in retail sales from 2018 to 2022 indicates that products with multiple ESG claims achieve significantly higher growth rates. Specifically, products with four ESG claims exhibit a CAGR approaching 15%, which is 2.5 times that of products with a single claim. This finding emphasizes the importance of multifaceted ESG strategies in enhancing product differentiation and driving sales growth, urging brands to broaden their ESG initiatives to encompass diverse dimensions of sustainability and ethical practices.

5. Conclusions

This research underscores the pivotal role of sustainability in shaping consumer purchasing decisions and guiding marketing strategies. Findings reveal that consumers are increasingly inclined to prioritize products with ESG-related claims, as evidenced by higher growth rates and brand loyalty for such offerings. Key drivers of green purchasing behavior include environmental concerns, intrinsic motivation, and long-term sustainability perceptions, while price sensitivity plays a lesser role. The study also highlights the significant impact of multiple ESG claims on product differentiation and sales growth, emphasizing the need for companies to adopt comprehensive and credible ESG practices.

From a practical perspective, this study suggests that businesses should integrate multifaceted ESG claims into their product portfolios and communicate their sustainability efforts effectively to build consumer trust. Furthermore, enhancing the transparency and authenticity of ESG-related

claims is essential to mitigate skepticism and foster long-term brand loyalty. By incorporating multiple, credible ESG claims into their marketing strategies, businesses can not only align with evolving consumer values but also achieve substantial growth in a competitive market. Marketers should prioritize educating consumers about the interconnected benefits of multiple ESG initiatives to build trust and encourage purchase behavior.

Future research could explore the role of digital advocacy and technological innovations in promoting sustainable consumer behavior and evaluate the long-term business impact of sustainability-focused marketing strategies. By adopting a synergistic approach that aligns business practices with consumer expectations, companies can contribute to the broader global sustainability agenda while achieving competitive growth.

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