

Consumer Perceptions of Sustainable Products and Their Impact on Purchase Intention: A Thematic Literature Review

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Abstract: As sustainability becomes central to contemporary business strategy and public discourse, consumer perception of sustainability has emerged as a pivotal variable in shaping market behavior. Still a persistent paradox remains despite growing awareness and favorable attitudes toward sustainability, actual consumer behavior often falls short of sustainable ideals. This review critically examines the formation, drivers, and barriers of consumer perceptions of sustainability across six key sectors food and beverage, fashion, cosmetics, electronics, automotive, and hospitality. By applying the Theory of Planned Behavior and Value-Belief-Norm frameworks across diverse empirical contexts, the study offers a multidimensional synthesis of how sustainable behavior is conceived and enacted.

Using a structured thematic review methodology, the paper identifies four key literature themes consumer perception formation, emotional and cognitive drivers, purchase intention, and sociocultural moderators and maps these across sector-specific variations. In emotionally resonant industries such as fashion, cosmetics, and hospitality, sustainability perception is strongly shaped by moral identity, emotional storytelling, and social validation. These are best explained by VBN theory, which links internalized values and moral norms to pro-environmental intention. In contrast, sectors like electronics and automotive show greater reliance on rational evaluation, feasibility, and infrastructure availability, domains where TPB's constructs of attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms offer stronger predictive power.

Despite these theoretical strengths, the review reveals a persistent attitude-behavior gap across all sectors. Consumers frequently express ethical preferences but fail to act due to factors such as habitual behavior, price sensitivity, low trust, infrastructure constraints, or ethical fatigue. TPB captures these breakdowns through structural and normative barriers, while VBN explains how moral norms fail to activate under conditions of ambiguity or disillusionment. Greenwashing, inconsistent labeling, and weak feedback mechanisms further erode consumer trust, diminishing both cognitive confidence (TPB) and ethical motivation (VBN).

The paper also surfaces key cross-sectoral contrasts. While emotional triggers and identity alignment drive perception in experiential sectors, functional sectors require trust in technical claims and long-term performance. Demographics and culture further moderate these dynamics young, urban, and educated consumers show stronger sustainability engagement, but only when supported by behavioral feasibility and normative validation. Digital platforms amplify these processes, but their role remains under-theorized in current models.

In conclusion, the review underscores that sustainable consumption is not solely a function of awareness or product attributes. It is an outcome of systemic alignment between ethical values, market structures, and behavioral enablers. For brands, policymakers, and researchers alike, this means shifting from abstract advocacy to designing systems that empower, verify, and emotionally engage consumers. Only through such integrative efforts can sustainable behavior be moved from niche aspiration to normalized practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has increasingly become a burning global issue in the past few years. This change has not only impacted policy and industry but also the daily activities of consumers. Shifts in climate, deteriorating ecosystems, and depletion of resources have changed the public debate and transformed expectations across different industries. Consumers today, for instance, do not buy products for the sake of acquiring goods only, they are now making choices based on their values which span ethical, environmental, and social dimensions (Fan & Weiming, 2023). Therefore, the market for sustainable

goods has expanded rapidly, prompting researchers and practitioners to understand the factors that shape consumer attitudes and behaviors towards these products.

Although there is new interest on sustainable products, consumers' stated environmental concerns and their purchase decisions diverge in contrasting ways which is termed the "attitude-behavior gap." This gap sheds light on the complexities of sustainable consumption and highlights the need for further exploration of the psychological, sociocultural, and situational context surrounding consumer choices (Groth et al., 2023). Although favourable attitudes towards sustainability are becoming more common, they do not necessarily get reflected in behaviour, which indicates that emotional, cognitive, and social aspects probably play a complex role in purchase intentions.

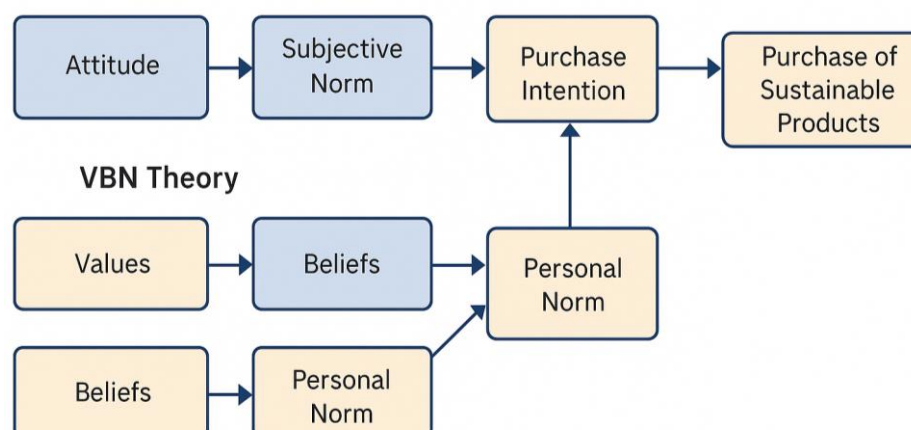
Furthermore, businesses are now faced with the task of not only providing green product but effectively and convincingly communicating their sustainability efforts. Those brands that fail to communicate authenticity – or get caught out greenwashing – will stand to lose consumer trust, a critical condition for driving environmentally supportive behavior (Sipos, 2024). In contrast, transparent companies that involve consumers in the narrative and discussion of sustainability in an authentic way, can establish long-term loyalty, and make ethical consumption a competitive advantage (Bhargava et al., 2023). Emotional storytelling, third-party certifications, and participatory marketing are among the strategies that have shown promise in bridging the trust deficit.

The power of consumer perception has also been intensified by digital technology. Social media and online reviews have emerged as major platforms, through which sustainability stories are defined, contested, and confirmed (Hendro & Keni, 2020). The advent of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and influencer marketing has empowered sustainable brands to get access to "tribes", while also making them more vulnerable. It is credibility that drives success in green markets, rather than visibility (Arantes, 2023).

Psychological theories play an essential part in this respect. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, are frameworks that offer organized knowledge as to the influence of attitudes, norms and perceived control on behavioral intentions. These theories offer a useful framework for interpreting consumer intentions, particularly when there is a contradiction between intention and behavior (Ceglia et al., 2015). Concurrently, sociocultural influences (regional norms and demographic factors, such as age, income, and education), as well as behavioural sanctions and rewards further mediate 'sustainable' behaviours such that there is a need for localised marketing strategies (Lizcano-Prada, 2024; Shahsavari et al., 2020).

This article is a thematic literature review that integrates findings across various fields of study such as marketing, psychology, sustainability science, and consumer studies in an attempt to better understand the complicated relationship between consumer perceptions of sustainable products and purchase intention. The constructs underpinning consumer perception (awareness, trust, perceived value, emotional connection and social norms) are explored critically through interdisciplinary research and reveal the impact emerging perceptions have on different sectors including fashion, food, cosmetic, electronic, hospitality and mobility.

Theory of Planned Behavior Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory



2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To do so, we suggest that models of consumer decision making about sustainability products need to integrate classic psychological theories about rational deliberation as well as moral value systems. Two main theories used in sustainability research are the TPB and VBN theory. These models represent two complementary views: TPB is mainly concerned with behavioral intention due to individual attitudes and perceived social pressure, whereas VBN emphasizes the moral and normative aspects of consumer behavior.

2.1 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

This model was originally developed by Ajzen (TBP) and has three direct determinants of behavior: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. Each of these factors is key in forming one's intentions, which in turn are predictive of behaviour. In the field of sustainable consumption, this theory has been widely used to explain how consumers develop purchasing intentions for green products (Ceglia et al. 2015).

Attitude is one's general feeling of approval or disapproval toward performing a behavior (in this case, buying sustainable products). Further, consumers who perceive sustainable products as high quality and positive for the environment are more likely to develop strong purchase intentions (Groth et al. 2023).

Subjective norms encompass the perceived social pressures to engage or not engage in a behavior. Studies in the sustainability domain show that peer influence, especially from family, friends, and trusted figures, significantly affects whether consumers follow through on their intentions (Islam et al., 2024). For instance, recommendations by influencers and social validation through digital platforms often reinforce the desirability of sustainable choices (Hendro & Keni, 2020; Arantes, 2023).

Perceived behavioral control captures the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior and is conceptually similar to self-efficacy. This factor is particularly important in the green consumer context, as external barriers like price, product availability and confusing labels can diminish perceived control and thereby reduce purchase intention even when attitudes and norms are supportive (Shahsavari et al., 2020).

Collectively, these three constructs form the predictive foundation of TPB, suggesting that for sustainability initiatives to succeed, brands must influence all three levers: create positive associations (attitude), normalize green consumption through social proof (subjective norm), and reduce perceived difficulty (behavioral control).

2.2 Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory

While TPB provides a robust behavioral model, it does not fully capture the moral and ethical dimensions of sustainability. The VBN theory, advanced by Stern and colleagues, addresses this gap by connecting general values to specific pro-environmental behaviors through a chain of psychological processes: values → beliefs → personal norms → behavior (Ceglia et al., 2015).

The starting point is an individual's values especially altruistic, biospheric, and collectivist values which inform their belief in environmental protection as a moral obligation. These values shape specific beliefs, such as awareness of consequences (e.g., climate change, pollution) and ascription of personal responsibility. These beliefs then activate personal norms: internalized expectations that compel action regardless of external rewards.

For example, a consumer who believes that unsustainable production harms communities or ecosystems may feel a moral duty to support brands that reflect environmental stewardship (Bhargava et al., 2023; Abulkhair, 2025). This moral obligation encoded as a personal norm can powerfully influence purchasing decisions, often overriding cost or convenience concerns.

Moreover, research shows that consumers driven by strong personal norms are less susceptible to social or commercial persuasion but more loyal to ethically aligned brands (Sipos, 2024).

2.3 Integrated Perspective

While TPB and VBN differ in origin one rooted in behavioral psychology, the other in moral philosophy they intersect meaningfully in sustainability research. As the conceptual diagram illustrates, both models converge on purchase intention as a critical mediator. However, while TPB emphasizes rational and social predictors, VBN highlights ethical

beliefs and personal accountability. These frameworks are not mutually exclusive but rather synergistic: attitudes and norms predicted by TPB may be reinforced or even generated by underlying value systems articulated in VBN.

This integrated perspective is essential for designing sustainability interventions. For instance, awareness campaigns should not only emphasize the environmental impact (to shape attitude and beliefs) but also foster moral engagement and personal identity with sustainability (to activate personal norms). Similarly, marketing strategies that merely appeal to “green” features without reinforcing shared values may fall short of generating long-term loyalty.

In summary, the Theory of Planned Behavior and Value-Belief-Norm Theory offer powerful explanatory tools for understanding sustainable consumption. They highlight that both cognitive assessments (e.g., product usefulness, affordability) and deeply held ethical convictions (e.g., justice, stewardship) must be addressed to effectively shape consumer perceptions and drive green purchase intentions. As such, these theories provide a foundational framework for the sections that follow in this review, where consumer attitudes, emotional triggers, and industry-specific patterns are critically examined.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a thematic literature review methodology to synthesize and critically analyze the existing body of knowledge on consumer perceptions of sustainable products and their impact on purchase intention. This method is particularly suited to complex, interdisciplinary topics where empirical evidence is dispersed across diverse contexts, theories and methodological traditions. Unlike systematic reviews, which emphasize replicability and strict inclusion protocols, thematic reviews allow for deeper exploration of conceptual patterns, emerging debates and unresolved contradictions across the literature (Torraco, 2016).

3.1 Literature Search Strategy

To ensure both relevance and academic rigor, the review was restricted to peer reviewed articles published in open access Scopus-indexed journals. Databases searched included ScienceDirect, MDPI, SpringerLink and Emerald Insight. The search prioritized full-text availability and publication in English to support accessibility and uniformity in analysis.

Search terms were constructed using Boolean combinations of keywords associated with sustainable consumption and consumer behavior. These included:-

- “sustainable consumption”
- “green purchasing behavior”
- “consumer perceptions”
- “perceived value”
- “green trust”
- “environmental knowledge”
- “green marketing”
- “behavioral control”
- “social identity”
- “demographic factors”

These terms were iteratively refined during the review process to capture sector-specific variations in terminology and conceptual framing.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review focused on studies that explicitly examined:-

- Consumer perceptions of sustainable, green, or ethically produced products
- The relationship between these perceptions and purchase intention or consumer behavior
- Mediating or moderating variables such as emotions, trust, social norms or personal values
- Industry applications in food, fashion, cosmetics, mobility, hospitality or electronics

Studies were excluded if they:-

- Focused solely on organizational sustainability without addressing consumer perspectives
- Were not published in open-access Scopus-indexed journals
- Lacked empirical or theoretical depth (e.g. opinion pieces, commentaries)
- Duplicated existing evidence without offering new conceptual insights

Ultimately, this process yielded a carefully curated corpus of articles, all of which are referenced in the final bibliography of this review.

3.3 Data Analysis and Synthesis Approach

The selected literature was reviewed iteratively using qualitative coding to identify emergent themes and conceptual categories. The analysis began with open coding to capture recurring ideas (e.g., trust, transparency, emotional appeal), followed by axial coding to group these ideas under broader thematic constructs (e.g., cognitive dimensions, emotional influence, sectoral specificity). The final stage involved selective coding to identify higher-order patterns that cut across industry boundaries or theoretical paradigms.

Key themes emerged in the domains of:

- Perception-building mechanisms (e.g., information sources, brand narratives)
- Purchase intention predictors (e.g., trust, perceived quality, normative pressure)
- Sectoral divergence in consumer expectations and brand responses
- Barriers and contradictions within consumer behavior (e.g., the attitude-behavior gap)

The findings are structured thematically in the subsequent sections, allowing for analytical depth and cross-sectoral comparison. This approach not only clarifies what is known but also reveals what remains under-theorized, thereby laying the groundwork for more targeted empirical research and strategic applications.

3.4 Methodological Rationale

The use of a thematic literature review rather than a meta-analysis or systematic review is justified by the multidimensional nature of the subject. Sustainability perceptions are shaped by a range of psychological, cultural and contextual factors that resist easy quantification. Moreover, the diversity of frameworks (e.g., TPB, VBN, social identity theory) requires interpretive synthesis to trace conceptual evolution rather than statistical aggregation.

Hence, the adopted methodology is consistent with the goals of this paper: to critically interpret, contextualize and advance scholarly understanding of consumer behavior in the age of sustainability, using only high-quality peer reviewed research from Scopus-recognized sources.

4. LITERATURE THEMES

This section synthesizes recurring scholarly themes in the literature on consumer perceptions of sustainable products and their influence on purchase intention. Through thematic coding and cross-comparison of peer-reviewed studies, four dominant conceptual strands emerged: (1) perception formation, (2) determinants of purchase intention, (3) emotional and cognitive influences, and (4) social and demographic moderators. Each theme contributes uniquely to understanding the complexity of sustainable consumption.

4.1 Consumer Perceptions: Formation and Complexity

Consumer perception of sustainability is a multifaceted construct, shaped by a blend of cognitive evaluations, emotional responses and contextual influences. According to Groth et al. (2023) and Goryńska-Goldmann et al. (2016), many consumers claim to support sustainable products, yet their understanding of what constitutes sustainability often remains superficial. Attributes such as biodegradable packaging or green color schemes are frequently interpreted as proxies for ethical production, even when no substantive environmental benefits are guaranteed.

This dynamic aligns with the attitudinal component of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), where consumer beliefs about product characteristics directly shape their attitude toward sustainable consumption. However, these attitudes are not always grounded in verified knowledge, revealing a cognitive vulnerability in perception formation. From the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) perspective, the presence of vague or inconsistent definitions weakens the chain from ecological belief to normative activation, diminishing the motivational force behind ethical consumption.

A critical tension in the literature arises around the role of brand cues in shaping perception. While Bhargava et al. (2023) and Srisathan et al. (n.d.) highlight how storytelling and transparency positively reinforce credibility, Fan and Weiming (2023) caution that in sectors lacking regulation, such as cosmetics or food, unverified claims create confusion and skepticism. This divergence illustrates a perception paradox: emotional marketing may initially attract consumers but can backfire if unsupported by authentic sustainability practices. The credibility gap, in this context, becomes a key disruptor of both TPB's subjective norms (as trust in influencers or peer communities erodes) and VBN's personal norms (as ethical dissonance emerges).

Sectoral context further complicates perception. In food and cosmetics, features like "organic" or "cruelty-free" resonate intuitively with consumers and often drive positive attitudes and intentions. These align well with affective components of attitude formation in TPB and normative concern in VBN. However, in electronics or automotive, perception hinges more on lifecycle efficiency or carbon offset, requiring consumers to process complex technical information thereby activating perceived behavioral control, another TPB construct that significantly moderates intention.

Moreover, while some studies praise green branding as a facilitator of trust, others argue that over-reliance on visual or emotional cues undermines informed decision-making. For instance, while Sipos (2024) notes that eco-labels improve brand credibility, Goryńska-Goldmann et al. (2016) contend that the sheer volume and inconsistency of labels lead to confusion, ultimately weakening trust. This inconsistency reinforces the importance of both cognitive literacy (TPB) and belief clarity (VBN) in sustainable perception.

In sum, consumer perception is not a linear or rational process it is constructed through a fluid interplay of emotion, information, social context, and industry cues. The effectiveness of sustainability communication depends on its ability to resonate emotionally while also providing clarity and credibility. From a theoretical standpoint, TPB helps illuminate the cognitive and normative levers influencing perception, while VBN explains why ethically motivated consumers may still hesitate if beliefs and norms are not clearly triggered. Both frameworks are necessary to understand the complexity and often fragility of sustainability perception in the contemporary marketplace.

4.2 Determinants of Purchase Intention

Among the constructs influencing sustainable consumer behavior, purchase intention consistently emerges as the most reliable proxy for behavioral outcomes. However, its determinants are layered and context-dependent, shaped by a range of cognitive, emotional, and structural variables. Theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) model provide useful interpretive frameworks, but each captures different dimensions of intention formation—and occasionally diverge in explanatory strength across sectors.

Within the TPB framework, attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are all instrumental in shaping intention. Kang and Jin (2015) and Hendro and Keni (2020) highlight how favorable attitudes toward sustainable products driven by perceived benefits like quality, health, or moral satisfaction lead to higher purchase intent. These positive evaluations confirm the predictive role of attitude in TPB and suggest that even utilitarian value judgments may be infused with moral framing, as suggested by VBN.

However, the translation of positive attitude into intention is often moderated by perceived behavioral control. Shahsavari et al. (2020) note that even when consumers express pro-sustainability views, actual intention is undermined by structural obstacles such as cost, lack of accessibility, or product complexity. This component of TPB is especially vital in high-involvement sectors like automotive and electronics, where the decision process requires long-term commitment and information processing. In such contexts, intention is not only about willingness but also feasibility.

Interestingly, VBN introduces a normative and ethical layer often overlooked by TPB. Studies by Bhargava et al. (2023) and Abulkhair (2025) demonstrate that consumers who feel a personal moral obligation to act sustainably are more likely to develop and act on their intentions regardless of market challenges. This internalized sense of responsibility connects directly to VBN's emphasis on personal norms, which often override market logic, particularly among ethically committed consumers. Yet, this strength can also become a limitation: in mainstream settings where such norms are weak or untriggered, intention fails to materialize.

Digital influence plays an increasingly important role. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and influencer driven content significantly shape both subjective norms (TPB) and belief activation (VBN). Hendro and Keni (2020) show that social validation through online platforms can reinforce green purchase intentions by normalizing ethical consumption. However, Arantes (2023) argues that such social signals may create performative behavior, where intention is driven by visibility and social capital rather than genuine ethical concern a scenario where TPB's normative influence may be superficial and short-lived.

The literature also presents some internal contradictions. For instance, while Kurumbatu (2024) emphasizes trust and brand credibility as key antecedents of intention, Groth et al. (2023) suggest that in sectors with persistent greenwashing, even high-trust consumers may hesitate due to learned skepticism. This contrast reveals the fragility of intention formation in the face of conflicting market signals where VBN's normative motivators may be overwhelmed by TPB's perception of behavioral infeasibility.

In summary, purchase intention is shaped by both rational evaluation and moral commitment, and must be understood as the product of interacting variables across TPB and VBN. While TPB is particularly adept at modeling decision paths influenced by feasibility and peer influence, VBN captures the deeper ethical motivations that drive long term behavioral consistency. To influence intention effectively, marketers and policymakers must activate both ensuring that consumers feel both ethically compelled and practically empowered to act.

4.3 Emotional and Cognitive Influences

While traditional models of consumer behavior often emphasize rational evaluation, the literature on sustainable consumption reveals the decisive role of emotion and cognition in shaping perceptions and guiding purchase intention. These two dimensions emotional engagement and cognitive awareness interact dynamically and often unpredictably. Theories such as the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) model excel in explaining emotionally driven behavior through personal norms and moral activation, while the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) clarifies how cognitive beliefs and perceived control guide intentionality.

Emotional triggers including guilt, pride, hope, and empathy have been found to significantly impact sustainable behavior, particularly in high identification sectors like fashion, beauty, and hospitality. Petty et al. (2002) and Shahzad (2023) argue that sustainability campaigns rooted in emotionally resonant storytelling are more likely to activate positive affect and increase behavioral commitment. In VBN terms these emotions act as catalysts, transforming abstract values into personal moral norms, which then guide behavioral decisions. Brands that succeed in making consumers feel responsible inspired or empowered tend to generate stronger loyalty and advocacy.

However, the emotional route is not universally effective. Petty et al. caution that emotional saturation especially through overuse of guilt or virtue appeals can lead to psychological reactance or ethical fatigue. This introduces a tension within the literature while emotional engagement can reinforce values (as VBN suggests), it may also backfire if perceived as manipulative or inauthentic. This nuance is underexplored in many models and deserves closer empirical attention.

On the cognitive side, environmental knowledge plays a foundational role. Consumers who possess higher sustainability literacy are better equipped to evaluate product claims, assess authenticity, and make informed decisions (Russo et al., 2012; Abulkhair, 2025). This dimension aligns with TPB's attitudinal formation, where belief strength and information accuracy shape how a consumer evaluates a behavior. However, knowledge is not uniformly distributed: Goryńska-Goldmann et al. (2016) report that many consumers still equate vague terms like "natural" or "eco-friendly" with sustainability, despite the lack of verified benefits.

Here, TPB and VBN diverge in their emphasis. TPB assumes that more accurate knowledge leads to better decision-making through rational attitude formation. In contrast, VBN suggests that knowledge only matters when it activates moral awareness and a sense of personal responsibility. The practical implication is that information alone is insufficient unless it is also emotionally and ethically contextualized.

Emotional and cognitive influences also intersect in the concept of brand authenticity. When consumers detect misalignment between a brand's sustainability narrative and its actual practices, emotional disillusionment sets in, undermining both trust and intention (Bhargava et al., 2023; Sipos, 2024). This emotional fallout can be understood through TPB's lens as a breakdown in subjective norm credibility and through VBN's as a failure to uphold internalized values.

The rise of cultural phenomena such as "clean beauty," "slow fashion," and "plant-based eating" also illustrates how emotional identity and cognitive literacy coalesce to form sustainability-centered consumer tribes (Yang & Hamid, 2024;

Olwoch et al., 2023). These tribes often act as norm-setting communities, reinforcing both TPB's subjective norms and VBN's moral norms, making them powerful engines of behavior change but also raising concerns about elitism, performative consumption, and exclusion.

In sum, emotional and cognitive processes are mutually reinforcing yet occasionally contradictory. The emotional appeal of a brand may encourage engagement, but without sufficient cognitive substantiation, it risks backlash. Conversely, even the most well-informed consumers may not act unless emotionally activated. TPB and VBN, when used together, help capture this dual complexity, emphasizing that sustainable behavior is shaped as much by what consumers know as by what they feel and how both are embedded in social and moral frameworks.

4.4 Social and Demographic Moderators

Consumer perceptions of sustainability and their subsequent purchase intentions are profoundly shaped by social influences and demographic characteristics. These moderators do not function in isolation but interact with emotional, cognitive, and structural drivers to either amplify or suppress sustainable behavior. Both the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) model incorporate social influence mechanisms albeit through different pathways with TPB emphasizing subjective norms and VBN focusing on internalized moral norms developed through cultural and social learning.

Social norms, particularly those embedded in peer groups, online communities, and influencer networks, have become powerful motivators for sustainability oriented behavior. Islam et al. (2024) and Arantes (2023) demonstrate that consumers are more likely to adopt green consumption habits when they perceive that such behaviors are endorsed or expected by their social environment. This aligns directly with TPB's subjective norm component, wherein individuals assess the opinions of relevant others and adjust their intentions accordingly.

However, not all social influence is equal. While Hendro and Keni (2020) emphasize the value of influencer marketing and e-WOM in reinforcing green norms, Sipos (2024) warns of superficial norm conformity, where consumers engage in "ethical consumption" primarily for social validation rather than authentic commitment. This divergence presents a critical nuance: subjective norms may drive short term compliance, but without the moral internalization captured in VBN theory, such behaviors may not be sustained over time.

Additionally, co-creation practices, where consumers actively participate in sustainability initiatives (e.g., product design feedback, community campaigns), have been shown to strengthen trust and deepen commitment. According to Bhargava et al. (2023) and Sarmah and Singh (2024), this participatory engagement transforms the consumer from a passive receiver of green messaging into a moral agent, reinforcing VBN's personal norm pathway.

Demographics also play a central moderating role. Education level consistently emerges as a predictor of both environmental awareness and sustainable behavior. Shahsavar et al. (2020) found that consumers with higher education are more likely to decode sustainability claims, resist greenwashing, and prioritize ethical considerations even when confronted with price or accessibility trade-offs. From a TPB lens, education enhances the attitudinal and control components by improving information processing and reducing perceived barriers. Simultaneously, VBN suggests that education fosters a broader ecological worldview, which can strengthen the moral obligation to act.

Income and age also influence perceptions and behaviors, though often in conflicting ways. While younger consumers tend to be more sustainability-aware and emotionally engaged, they may lack the financial autonomy to act on their values consistently. Conversely, older or lower-income consumers may exhibit greater skepticism or prioritize economic value over ethics unless tangible, long-term benefits are clearly communicated (Kaakandikar et al., 2024). These findings complicate both TPB's behavioral control assumptions and VBN's moral norm generalizability, suggesting that demographic realities can constrain theoretically predicted behavior.

Cultural context further amplifies or dampens sustainable behavior. In a comparative study, Lizcano-Prada et al. (2024) observed that Colombian consumers prioritized product origin and sustainability information, whereas Spanish consumers were more price-conscious. These distinctions demonstrate how cultural norms modulate both subjective and personal norms, influencing not only what is perceived as sustainable, but also what is considered socially or morally acceptable.

Finally, gendered patterns in sustainable consumption reveal that women are often more engaged in ethical concerns around health, beauty, and animal welfare (Bumin & Bumin, 2024), whereas men may focus more on innovation and efficiency, particularly in technology and mobility sectors. While these tendencies reflect market segmentation trends,

they also underscore the need for gender sensitive sustainability messaging that aligns with both TPB's normative structures and VBN's value systems.

In summary, social and demographic moderators provide the contextual scaffolding that supports or hinders sustainable behavior. TPB helps clarify how perceived social expectations shape intention, while VBN explains how deeply held values translate into moral norms. Integrating both allows for a more granular understanding of why certain groups engage in sustainable behavior while others resist it even when exposed to similar information and messaging.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implication

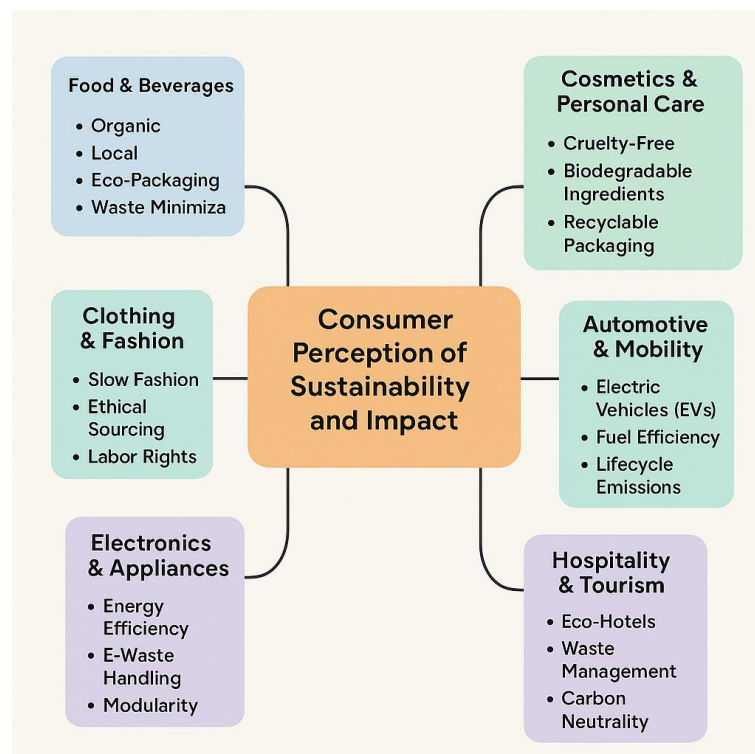
Across all themes, it becomes clear that consumer perception is not static but a dynamic construct shaped by an ongoing negotiation between internal values, external signals, and structural enablers. The integration of TPB and VBN theories (as discussed in Section 2) finds real-world validation in these findings. Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control predict intention, but their effect is moderated by deeper value systems, moral norms, and cultural affiliations.

The reviewed literature emphasizes that purchase intention is not merely a transactional decision it reflects identity, trust, and ethical orientation. Hence, marketing strategies must go beyond product-level messaging and instead create value-driven brand narratives that integrate both emotional resonance and factual transparency. Brands must also consider intersectional strategies that accommodate demographic diversity, sector-specific expectations, and regional cultural values.

Moreover, scholars argue for a more longitudinal approach to understanding how perceptions evolve over time, especially as societal norms around sustainability continue to mature (Ceglia et al., 2015). Capturing these shifts is critical for both theory development and the strategic recalibration of marketing practices in real-time.

5. SECTORAL INSIGHTS

Understanding consumer perceptions of sustainability requires not only theoretical analysis but also sector-specific interpretation. Different industries evoke unique expectations and barriers when it comes to green purchasing. This section analyzes consumer behavior across six major sectors food and beverage, fashion, cosmetics, electronics, automotive, and hospitality. These domains were selected based on their environmental footprint, relevance in sustainability discourse, and diversity in consumer interaction.



5.1 Food and Beverage

Consumers in the food sector often express sustainable intentions, but behavior is constrained by price sensitivity and confusion over labeling. Words like organic, eco-friendly, and non-GMO influence perception but may lack standardized meanings, creating mistrust (Goryńska-Goldmann et al., 2016). Whole Foods successfully mitigates this through verified labeling and sourcing transparency. TPB explains how attitudes and perceived behavioral control affect decisions, while VBN accounts for moral norms activated by concern for health and the environment (Fan & Weiming, 2023).

5.2 Fashion

Fashion consumers are guided by personal identity, emotional connection and trend responsiveness (Kang & Jin, 2015). Brands like Patagonia leverage moral values by embedding transparency, fair labor and environmental activism into their narrative. However, fast fashion's low prices and high availability often override ethical intentions. VBN effectively explains this value alignment, while TPB reveals how subjective norms and social media influence intentions (Bhargava et al., 2023; Hendro & Keni, 2020).

5.3 Cosmetics and Personal Care

Ethical claims like cruelty-free and clean beauty are powerful perception drivers in this sector (Bumin & Bumin, 2024). However, unregulated terminology weakens informed decision making (Russo et al., 2012). Lush exemplifies success through ingredient transparency and ethical manufacturing. TPB highlights the role of positive attitudes and ease of access, while VBN maps how emotional alignment (e.g. animal rights) leads to habitual ethical consumption (Shahzad, 2023).

5.4 Electronics and Technology

Consumers often consider energy efficiency and durability, but decisions are constrained by technical complexity, price and limited infrastructure for repair or recycling (Balasubramaniam & Paul, 2018). Fairphone markets sustainable, modular smartphones, appealing to consumers with strong biospheric values. However, TPB reveals low behavioral control due to lack of support systems, while VBN explains niche uptake through personal norms (Abulkhair, 2025).

5.5 Automotive and Mobility

Electric vehicle (EV) consumers often report high sustainability intent but hesitate due to range anxiety, battery concerns and cost (Islam et al., 2024). Tesla counters this by emphasizing performance and environmental impact, which activates both TPB control beliefs and VBN moral norms. Yet, the high cost and infrastructural limitations still restrict adoption for many (Kaakandikar et al., 2024).

5.6 Hospitality and Tourism

Sustainability in hospitality relies on visibility and guest experience. Eco-certifications, reduced laundry programs and community engagement appeal to biospheric values (Srisathan et al., 2025). Hilton's GreenStay gives guests a sense of empowerment, which boosts perceived control (TPB) and personal moral engagement (VBN) (Sarmah & Singh, 2024). However, guests are quick to detect tokenism, and weak implementation reduces credibility (Groth et al., 2023).

Sectoral Driver–Barrier Matrix

Table: How Consumer Behavior Drivers and Barriers Differ by Industry.

Sector	TPB Driver	VBN Driver	Primary barrier
Fashion	Social Norms	Moral Identity	Price vs. ethics
Electronics	Perceived Control	Environmental Beliefs	Repairability, complexity
Cosmetics	Attitudes	Ethical Concern	Label confusion
Food & Beverage	Attitudes	Value Consistency	Trust, affordability
Automotive	Control & Norms	Climate Commitment	Infrastructure gap
Hospitality	Norms & Trust	Biospheric Values	Weak Visibility

This table compares six major industries to show what motivates consumers to buy sustainably and what tends to hold them back. It draws on both rational and value-based influences from TPB and VBN models, highlighting where things like price, trust or access create friction in turning good intentions into real action.

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The interplay between consumer perception and sustainable behavior is not uniform it varies significantly across sectors depending on product characteristics, cultural relevance, emotional investment, and infrastructure readiness. While the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) models remain foundational in explaining sustainable intention, their relative explanatory power shifts by sector. This section offers a cross-sectoral analysis, identifying convergence points, divergences, and theory application nuances that deepen our understanding of how sustainability is perceived and acted upon in context-specific ways.

6.1 Emotional vs. Functional Anchors

One of the most striking differences across sectors lies in how consumer perception is anchored emotionally or functionally. In fashion, cosmetics, and hospitality, the emotional dimension dominates. Consumers in these sectors rely heavily on identity expression, ethical alignment and brand storytelling to shape perception, often guided by internalized moral norms, as predicted by VBN theory. Emotional appeals in these sectors activate personal values, leading to behavior even in the absence of functional superiority or economic advantage.

By contrast, in electronics and automotive, perception is grounded in technical trust, product performance and usability. Here TPB's focus on attitude and perceived behavioral control becomes more relevant. Consumers are influenced less by moral emotion and more by perceived feasibility cost, infrastructure and product lifespan. This bifurcation in anchoring suggests that effective sustainability strategies must be sector-calibrated, tapping into the dominant mode of consumer evaluation.

6.2 Sector-Specific Attitude-Behavior Gaps

Across all sectors, the attitude-behavior gap persists but for different reasons. In food, the gap is largely due to price sensitivity and availability, where favorable attitudes don't materialize into action because of low behavioral control (TPB). In electronics, the gap stems from knowledge asymmetry and technical confusion, suggesting a cognitive barrier to value action alignment.

In emotionally led sectors like fashion, cosmetics and hospitality, the gap narrows when social norms and emotional resonance are well activated (TPB + VBN synergy). However, when sustainability is framed as sacrifice or lacks authenticity, even emotionally motivated consumers disengage. This highlights that bridging the gap requires more than attitude change it demands structural support (TPB) and moral norm reinforcement (VBN) in tandem.

6.3 Role of Trust and Certification

A cross-cutting variable is trust in brand messaging, labelling and institutional validation. In all sectors, trust amplifies intention when consumers perceive sustainability claims as credible. TPB emphasizes this through attitude formation, where brand reputation and third party certifications enhance belief strength. VBN, however, views trust as essential to activating moral engagement consumers must believe their ethical action matters.

Yet, trust is fragile. In food, fashion and cosmetics, greenwashing or inconsistent labeling undermines credibility, weakening both TPB's behavioral confidence and VBN's moral activation. The critical insight here is that communication must be backed by verifiable action or else sustainability perception becomes superficial, performative and short-lived.

6.4 Influence of Digital Mediation

Digital platforms mediate sustainability perception differently across sectors. In fashion and cosmetics influencer-driven validation enhances TPB's subjective norm component, while emotional content aligns with VBN's moral narrative pathway. In electronics and automotive digital validation is more rational peer reviews, expert blogs and specs-based comparisons dominate, supporting attitude formation and control assessment.

This comparison shows that digital engagement should not be one size fits all. Emotional sectors require relatable advocacy and authentic storytelling. Functional sectors benefit from transparent data and user empowerment. Future strategies must align platform design and content with the sector's cognitive-emotional balance to maximize impact.

6.5 Moderation by Demographics and Culture

Demographics play a consistent but nuanced role across sectors. In fashion, cosmetics, and hospitality, younger and more educated consumers exhibit stronger alignment with sustainability often through identity-based consumption (VBN). In automotive and electronics, higher income and technical literacy influence behavioral control (TPB).

Culturally, Western markets often show stronger moral activation, while price-conscious regions prioritize feasibility over ethics. Lizcano-Prada et al. (2024) illustrate that even within the same product category, consumer emphasis shifts between values and pragmatism based on cultural framing making localized norm activation (VBN) and context-sensitive control perception (TPB) essential for success.

6.6 Synthesis of Theoretical Fit

The comparative analysis affirms that no single theory sufficiently explains sustainable behavior across all sectors. TPB excels in explaining behavior constrained by structure especially where control, feasibility, and social approval shape action. VBN offers deeper insight in emotionally engaged sectors, where values, awareness, and internal moral drivers dominate.

The optimal approach is therefore combinatory. In emotionally resonant sectors, pair VBN's value framing with TPB's normative amplification via influencer campaigns. In functionally constrained sectors, strengthen TPB's control levers (infrastructure, affordability) and reinforce VBN's belief chain through impact transparency.

7. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Despite growing interest in sustainability, the gap between consumer intention and sustainable action remains a persistent and well documented challenge. This section synthesizes the most significant barriers to sustainable consumption, drawing on both theoretical (TPB, VBN) and empirical insights to explain why positive perception does not consistently lead to behavior change. These challenges exist across psychological, structural and social dimensions, highlighting the need for a multifaceted response from scholars, brands and policymakers alike.

7.1 Psychological Inertia and Habitual Behavior

One of the most pervasive barriers is habitual behavior consumers tend to revert to familiar routines despite updated knowledge or attitudes. This reflects a limitation of TPB, which assumes rational behavior formation and may underestimate behavioral inertia. Even when consumers hold favorable attitudes and perceive social support for sustainability, they often default to convenience, especially in low-involvement purchases like food or fast fashion (Groth et al., 2023).

From a VBN perspective, weak activation of personal norms may also contribute. If consumers do not experience a moral urgency or personal accountability, knowledge and values remain abstract and fail to motivate change. The literature suggests that habitual barriers are particularly resilient in sectors where ethical cues are weak, ambiguous, or disconnected from everyday routines.

7.2 Greenwashing and Credibility Erosion

Another critical obstacle is greenwashing the overstatement or misrepresentation of sustainability claims. When consumers detect inconsistencies between brand messaging and actual practice, trust declines, weakening TPB's attitudinal and normative constructs (Fan & Weiming, 2023). Bhargava et al. (2023) emphasize that recurring exposure to greenwashing creates skepticism that generalizes beyond individual brands, damaging the entire category.

VBN theory identifies this as a threat to moral norm activation. When sustainability claims are misleading consumers may feel confused or manipulated, it reduces their willingness to align values with action. This is problematic in emotionally driven sectors like fashion and cosmetics, where trust and authenticity are important to brand engagement.

7.3 Affordability and Economic Trade-Offs

Cost remains a powerful barrier, particularly in lower- and middle-income consumer segments. In nearly all sectors

especially food, fashion and mobility sustainable options are perceived as more expensive or less accessible. This directly impairs perceived behavioral control, a key determinant in TPB.

In contrast, VBN suggests that for some ethically motivated consumers, values may override price sensitivity. Yet this only holds when moral norms are strong and reinforced by meaningful narratives or visible impact. For others, even strong values may not compensate for economic constraints. The implication is that sustainability must be democratized made not just morally desirable but materially affordable.

7.4 Infrastructure and Accessibility Limitations

Even when intentions are high, structural limitations such as lack of recycling facilities, poor access to sustainable goods or inadequate service support can prevent consumers from following through. In the automotive sector, for instance, EV adoption is hindered by charging infrastructure gaps (Islam et al., 2024). In electronics, the absence of repair services discourages circular behavior (Balasubramaniam & Paul, 2018).

These constraints diminish perceived behavioral control (TPB) and reduce belief in outcome efficacy (VBN). Consumers may feel that their individual actions are insignificant in the face of system-level failures eroding both confidence and moral motivation. Addressing these barriers requires both policy intervention and institutional accountability.

7.5 Labeling Confusion and Low Literacy

The proliferation of vague or unregulated sustainability labels contributes to confusion. Terms like eco-friendly, clean or natural are often unverified and inconsistently used across brands (Goryńska-Goldmann et al., 2016). This undermines attitude formation in TPB, as consumers struggle to make informed judgments.

From a VBN standpoint, inconsistent messaging prevents the formation of coherent beliefs and the subsequent triggering of personal norms. Even highly motivated consumers can become demotivated if they lack confidence in the information provided. Hence, standardization and regulatory clarity are essential for both cognitive trust and moral clarity.

7.6 Emotional Trade-offs and Ethical Fatigue

Sustainability decisions often involve emotional conflict. Choosing ethical fashion may conflict with affordability, while opting for plant-based food may challenge cultural norms. These emotional trade-offs can cause moral strain, especially when consumers feel they are sacrificing without visible impact (Yang & Hamid, 2024; Shahzad, 2023).

VBN highlights this as a norm overload problem if personal norms are activated too frequently without reinforcement, consumers may experience ethical fatigue. TPB does not explicitly account for emotional depletion, but its normative and attitudinal structures may collapse under sustained cognitive dissonance. The solution lies in normalizing incremental action and celebrating progress, rather than promoting absolute ethical standards.

7.7 Sociocultural and Demographic Mismatch

Not all sustainability narratives resonate equally across populations. Cultural values, income level, and age significantly affect whether sustainability is perceived as relevant or attainable. For instance, younger urban consumers are often more receptive to identity-based sustainability, while others may prioritize cost or convenience (Shahsavari et al., 2020; Lizcano-Prada et al., 2024).

This underscores the limitation of universal moral appeals (VBN) and generic normative messaging (TPB). Instead, sustainability strategies must be localized and demographically sensitive, aligning with consumers lived realities and belief systems.

7.8 Lack of Feedback and Reinforcement

Finally, sustainable behavior often suffers from the absence of visible feedback loops. Consumers want to know their actions matter but few systems provide tangible evidence of impact (e.g., CO2 saved, waste reduced). Without this, both TPB's control belief and VBN's moral satisfaction are undermined.

Brands and platforms must create interactive reinforcement mechanisms digital dashboards, certifications, or real-time metrics that help consumers internalize the effect of their choices. This not only validates behavior but also builds momentum for repetition, loyalty and advocacy.

Synthesis:

The challenges outlined above reveal that sustainable consumption is not merely a matter of belief or attitude it is constrained by psychological inertia, information deficits, structural barriers and moral fatigue. TPB helps identify where intention formation breaks down, while VBN explains why moral alignment often fails to translate into consistent behavior. Addressing these challenges requires an ecosystem-wide response combining consumer empowerment, brand transparency, policy intervention and norm engineering to make sustainable choices not just possible, but preferable.

8. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite a growing corpus of research on consumer sustainability behavior, the field remains fragmented and uneven in both theoretical application and empirical breadth. While the Theory of Planned Behavior and Value Belief Norm models have provided valuable explanatory frameworks, significant conceptual and methodological gaps persist, limiting our ability to design predictive, inclusive and actionable models of sustainable consumption. This section highlights key research gaps and outlines strategic directions for future inquiry that can advance the field both theoretically and practically.

8.1 Underutilization of Longitudinal and Behavioral Data

A major limitation across the literature is the lack of longitudinal studies. Most current research captures intention and perception at a single point in time, ignoring how these variables evolve. This is problematic given that sustainability behavior is often influenced by life events, habit formation and contextual change.

8.2 Emotional Mechanisms Are Under-Theorized

While VBN acknowledges the role of personal values and moral norms, the emotional pathways that trigger or sustain sustainable behavior are often underdeveloped in empirical studies. Research tends to describe affective factors (e.g. guilt, pride, hope) without operationalizing them as measurable constructs.

Future research should delve into emotion theory, measuring how emotional arousal, moral elevation or empathic concern mediate or moderate consumer decision-making. Doing so would enhance both VBN's moral framework and TPB's attitude components, providing a more complete understanding of how feelings interact with cognition and norms.

8.3 Sectoral and Product Type Comparisons Are Scarce

Most sustainability research remains sector-specific, focusing heavily on food, fashion or cosmetics. However, consumer decision making varies significantly depending on product involvement level, lifecycle visibility and functional complexity. Comparative studies across high versus low involvement products or experience versus material goods are rare but crucial.

8.4 Socioeconomic and Cultural Diversity Is Limited

A striking gap exists in the cultural and economic generalizability of current findings. Most studies originate from Western, educated, middle-class settings, limiting the applicability of conclusions to diverse populations. Yet, values, norms and perceived behavioral control vary widely across regions, religions and income levels (Lizcano-Prada et al., 2024; Shahsavar et al., 2020).

Future research must prioritize inclusive, cross-cultural studies that explore how TPB and VBN function in underrepresented populations such as rural consumers, indigenous communities or youth in emerging economies. Doing so would not only correct sampling biases but also contribute to more global, equitable sustainability models.

8.5 Digital Environments Need Theoretical Integration

While digital platforms (e.g. social media, review forums, shopping apps) have become critical in shaping perception, their role is under-theorized in relation to TPB and VBN. Current studies mention digital influence without explaining how algorithmic exposure, platform design or online feedback shape beliefs, attitudes or moral activation.

Future work should integrate digital behavior theories with TPB/VBN, exploring how digital affordances mediate social norms (TPB), reinforce emotional triggers (VBN) or shape perceived behavioral control through interface design. Experimental studies in digital ecosystems can reveal how perception is constructed and sustained in real time.

8.6 Policy and Regulation as Behavior Shapers

The influence of public policy, institutional trust, and regulatory frameworks on consumer perception is vastly underexplored in behavioral theory. Government interventions carbon labeling, tax incentives, bans may influence not only cost and access but also social norms and ethical urgency.

Future studies should assess how policy presence or absence modulates TPB and VBN pathways and whether interventions that are designed to change infrastructure also transform moral perception or attitude salience. This offers a promising avenue for interdisciplinary research that bridges behavioral science, public policy and marketing.

8.7 Toward Integrative and Adaptive Models

Finally, there is a need for more integrative models that combine the cognitive rigor of TPB with the moral and emotional nuance of VBN. Few studies have formally tested hybrid frameworks that account for both practical feasibility and internalized ethical drive. Moreover, existing models often assume stable conditions, when in reality consumer environments are dynamic, digital and increasingly politicized.

Future research should explore adaptive, context-sensitive models that adjust for evolving consumer contexts and complex decision architectures. These models should incorporate real-time data, emotion tracking and digital behavior mapping to provide a multidimensional understanding of sustainability perception.

In conclusion, addressing these research gaps will enable the field to move from fragmented findings to a more predictive, inclusive, and intervention-ready science. Integrating behavioral models with digital, emotional and policy dimensions will not only improve explanatory power but also equip stakeholders with actionable insights to promote sustainable behavior at scale.

9. CONCLUSION

This review has critically synthesized the multidimensional landscape of consumer perception of sustainability, mapping its drivers, barriers, and expressions across six key market sectors. Through the integrated application of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, the paper demonstrates that sustainable consumption is shaped not by single motivations but by the dynamic interplay of attitudes, emotions, norms and systemic conditions.

The central insight from this synthesis is that perception does not operate in isolation from context. In emotionally driven sectors like fashion, cosmetics, and hospitality, sustainability perception is built through moral narratives, identity expression and social validation mechanisms best understood through VBN's emphasis on value activation and personal norms. In contrast, in functionally oriented sectors such as electronics and automotive, perception is often constrained by price, infrastructure, and technical comprehension factors more effectively modeled by TPB's focus on attitudinal evaluation and perceived behavioral control.

Across all sectors, the attitude-behavior gap remains a persistent phenomenon. Consumers may express support for sustainable practices but often fail to act due to habitual behavior, price sensitivity, misinformation or low access. Here, TPB offers a structural explanation emphasizing control and normative expectations while VBN reveals deeper psychological insights into moral conflict, ethical fatigue or norm dilution. This dual perspective underscores the need for integrative behavioral models that capture both the practical and moral dimensions of consumption.

A recurring theme in the analysis is the fragility of trust. When consumers encounter greenwashing or vague sustainability claims, their perception weakens, leading to disillusionment and disengagement. This has implications for both theory and practice TPB suggests that attitude formation is disrupted by credibility gaps, while VBN warns that personal norms fail to activate in the absence of perceived integrity. As such, transparent communication and third-party validation are not simply branding tools they are the foundation of sustainable perception.

From a scholarly perspective, the review identifies critical research gaps that require attention: the under-theorization of emotion, lack of longitudinal and behavioral studies, insufficient cultural diversity and poor integration of digital influence and policy mediation into behavioral models. Addressing these limitations will enrich the theoretical landscape and enhance the predictive and prescriptive power of sustainability research.

In conclusion, this review affirms that the future of sustainable consumption lies not in promoting abstract ideals, but in designing emotionally compelling, structurally supported and morally aligned experiences. Perception is the entry point but to sustain it, brands and institutions must build systems that empower, verify and reward ethical behavior. Only then can sustainability move from fringe intention to mainstream reality.

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