

Sustainable by Choice: Understanding the Psychology Behind Eco-Friendly Consumer Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable consumer behavior is a complex interaction of individual values, perceived control as well as cognitive trust. Applied to the sphere of environmental concern, moral norms, perceived behavioral control, and the dimension of green trust are studied and modified through the intention to purchase eco-friendly products. Based on Theory of Planned Behavior and based on Value- Belief-Norm Theory, and Environmental Identity Theory, the study will be based on the evaluation of these relationships through the use of statistical modeling using secondary data. Findings show that most effective in influencing purchase intention is moral norm, which is significantly followed by environmental concern and the perceived behavioral control. Green trust serves as a facilitating agent between internal values and action choices of the consumer. Segmentation also indicates that the environmental concern among individuals is also very high and results in a much stronger sustainable intent, and this hypothesis was also proven to be true by the ethical alignment play. The study confers theoretical support of integrated behavioral models and also proffers tactical information to market and sustainability measures. The gap that tends to exist between intention and behaviour can be narrowed by increasing a sense of control on the part of the consumer and trust in the brand. This line of study promotes the psychology of eco-friendly consumption further to observe it in longitudinal studies with larger ethnically diverse groups to yield more dynamics of the behavior.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption, moral norms, environmental concern, green trust, behavioral intention



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INTRODUCTION

With the growing urgency of environmental issues, consumers are presented with the ethical consequences of their everyday shopping choices more and more. This understanding notwithstanding, there has always been a gap between what consumers claim they will do and what they end up doing in regards to sustainable choices (Jäger et al., 2022). Although the sustainability movements have brought an eco-friendly product into the mainstream, customer behavior is still disjointed and erratic (Kour, (2024). To see why this is the case, a profound investigation about the psychological and behavioral variables that affect sustainable decision-making is necessary. In previous studies, environmental concern (Ka & Nguyen, 2025) and moral norms (Chen, 2024) are recognized as the leading psychological drivers of eco-conscious intent, and perceived behavioral control (Kim et al., 2013) and identity signaling (Tshabalala, 2016) can be seen as the emerging ones. Nevertheless, these constructs are interconnected in a complicated manner, and they are

influenced by cultural norms, socioeconomic environments, and product-level cues (Nowacki et al., 2021; Testa et al., 2021). Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory and Environmental Identity Theory are among the theoretical frameworks developed to explain the link between values and behavior (Kotahwala, 2020). These models underline the interplay between intention, perceived control, and internalized values in many cases, with the help of emotional involvement (Amendah & Park, 2008) and expected consequences (Han et al., 2021). The research shows that emotional framing and the establishment of trust are central to producing sustainable action (Vinoth et al., 2024). Further, the intention-behavior gap is investigated in terms of heuristics, nudges and structural interventions in emerging findings in behavioral economics (Amiri et al., 2024; Lazarenko et al., 2021). Psychological triggers can also be in the form of practical cues, i.e., eco-labels, packaging, and visual marketing, which act as implicit decision-making aids (Jager et al., 2022;

Wechselberger, 2024). Nonetheless, consumer confidence is not very strong and can easily be ruined by greenwashing and mixed messages (Srivastava et al., 2024). Recent empirical research based on data of different origin e.g. GreenDB, World Values Survey enables researchers to examine the micro and macro level determinants of behavior. These sources do not only show us the individual values and attitudes associated with sustainable choices, but also how larger-scale societal norms and product framing affect consumers (Chen et al., 2021; Ha & Chau, 2022). With such a multi-layered complexity, contextualizing and synthesis of the existing knowledge is needed heavily. The study is useful in that it combines secondary empirical data with theory to describe the extent of the influence of psychological, emotional, and structural variables on eco-friendly consumer choice. The objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the psychological factors - moral norms, concern, and control which determine pro-environmental consumer behavior.
- To understand the interaction between product-level cues and behavioural nudges and internal motives to influence sustainable purchase choice.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- Which psychological constructs have the greatest influence on an intention to buy environmentally friendly products?
- What is the impact of product cues and emotional involvement as to how intention is translated to real consumer behavior?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of sustainable consumption has triggered multidisciplinary research on psychological, behavioral and situational determinants of green consumer choices. This review compiles important themes and presents the theoretical underpinnings of the current study.

2.1 Psychological Drivers of Sustainable Choices

Environmental concern, moral obligation, perceived behavioral control and affective motivation are some of the psychological factors that influence eco-friendly consumer behavior. As a case in point, Ka & Nguyen (2025) mentioned environmental concern as a fundamental predictor in developing countries. Chen (2024) proved the fact that moral norms are more powerful than attitudes in promoting sustainable intention. According to Kim et al. (2013), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was used to demonstrate that control and an expected emotion have an influence on eco-choice, with a combination of the two.

According to Amendah & Park (2008) people who are emotionally involved are more willing to pay a higher price on sustainable experiences. Paparoidamis & Tran (2019) showed that ethical adoption of products is associated with the need of consumers to express morality.

To go further, Vinoth et al. (2024) stated that green trust mediates the connection between care and real performance, which implies that trust can transform intentions into purchase.

2.2 Role of Product-Level Cues and Decision Support

In addition to the inner factors, the presentation and the information cues about the products influence decision-making significantly. The proposed GreenDB is a benchmark dataset by Jager et al. (2022), which involves the extraction of environmental assertions in product metadata. Wechselberger (2024) demonstrated that such packaging details as bio-degradable labels and design can have a crucial impact on the perception of consumers. Baviskar et al. (2024) investigated visual trends and concluded that the digital aesthetics modify the sustainable product appeal. Mohan et al. (2024) have studied the effects of AI-assisted filtering in making green products visible. Mallick et al. (2024) highlighted that certifications and endorsements are merely marketing tools that can only work when they are seen as credible. Sivarajah (2024) observed that branding-value misfit decreased the behavioral intent because of distrust.

2.3 Intention–Behavior Gap and Behavioral Interventions

Even though people tend to have increasing intentions to make sustainable decisions, they do not always follow through. Harliyono et al. (2025) explained this by situational barriers such as price and availability. Olasiuk & Bhardwaj (2019) pointed out the skepticism of corporate greenwashing as an obstacle to behavior. Savale et al. (2023) suggested that the product claims should be made more clear to reduce the ambiguity of eco-labeling. Amiri et al. (2024) proposed the use of behavioral nudges that promote green selection including framing and default options. Lazarenko et al. (2021) used the tools of behavioral economics to demonstrate the influence of environmental decisions by such biases as the loss aversion. Kotahwala (2020) offered a neuroscientific point of view, singling out how ethical consumption induces an activation of regions corresponding to the self-value system and cognitive dissonance.

2.4 Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Basis

The model employed in this study is based on Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory and Environmental Identity Theory. TPB provides a cognitive model in which the perceived control affects intention, which Kim et al. (2013) support, and is confirmed in green contexts by Ka and Nguyen (2025).

The values and beliefs are upstream drivers of the moral norms and behavior according to VBN theory, and the value is proven to be true empirically, according to Chen (2024).

The theory of environmental identity deals with the motivation of the self-concept in which concern mirrors the internalized green values. This connection is

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examined by Paparoidamis & Tran (2019) and Vinoth et al. (2024) and discovered that environmentally engaged individuals behave in a way that is consistent with their identity. Table 1 shows how each of the theories is operationalized by the variables of the study.

Table 1. Summary of Theoretical Constructs and Study Variables

Theory	Key Construct	Role in Study
Theory of Planned Behavior	Perceived Behavioral Control	Predictor of purchase intention
Value-Belief-Norm Theory	Environmental Concern, Moral Norms	Sequential influence on intention
Environmental Identity Theory	Environmental Concern (Proxy)	Reflects internalized self-concept
Behavioral Mediation	Green Trust	Mediator between concern/norms and intention

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Framework

The methodology of the study is both conceptual and secondary data-based, in order to explore the psychological factors that guide eco-friendly consumer choices. The study is based on behavioral theories like Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory and Environmental Identity Theory. These models offer a multidimensional perspective in which consumer attitude, norms, perceptions of control and identity connections can be examined. Unlike the primary research, the study synthesizes the results of proven datasets and published analysis, allowing a cross-contextual and theory-based interpretation of sustainable consumption behavior.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection

Three peer-reviewed datasets were chosen to analyze them on the basis of their relevance of the psychological constructs, methodological transparency, and empirical rigor. The first one (concentrating on sustainable consumption in Vietnam) is based on the survey of 551 participants and includes the attitudes, moral norms, and intentions to buy. The second one, the World Values Survey (Wave 7), provides cross-national large-scale data on civic values and environmental orientation. The third data, GreenDB, consists of more than 230,000 product listings in European e-commerce sites grouped according to sustainability labels and characteristics. These data can provide supplementary information regarding both consumer psychology and behavior at a product level. A summary is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of Datasets Used in the Study

Dataset Name	Type	Sample Size	Geographic Context	Key Constructs Captured
Vietnam Sustainable Consumption	Survey-based	551	Vietnam	Environmental concern, moral norms, perceived control, purchase intent
World Values Survey (Wave 7)	Survey-based	~34,000	40 countries (global)	Value orientation, civic responsibility, environmental priority
GreenDB Product Dataset	Product classification	230,000+	European e-commerce markets	Eco-label presence, sustainability categories, product-level triggers

3.3 Construct Mapping and Operationalization

The variables that were examined in this paper are environmental concern, perceived behavioral control, moral norms, environmental identity, and purchase intention. These are in accordance to their definition and measurement in the chosen datasets. In the Vietnam dataset, the direct measurement of environmental concern and moral norms with Likert type survey items is used. Perceived behavioral control represents how

people find it easy to practice sustainable consumption. In the World Values Survey, environmental identity is not directly measured, but instead is indicated indirectly by proxy measures (i.e. civic action and environmental values). The GreenDB dataset gives product-level cues including eco-labels, recycling claims, etc, which pertain to external drivers of sustainable behavior. Table 3 shows an overview of construct mapping.

Table 3. Psychological Constructs and Their Operationalization

Construct	Source Dataset(s)	Operational Form	Variable Type
Environmental Concern	Vietnam, WVS	Likert-type items on environmental degradation	Ordinal (1–5 scale)
Moral Norms	Vietnam	Internalized sense of environmental obligation	Ordinal (1–5 scale)
Perceived Behavioral Control	Vietnam	Perceived ease of sustainable choices	Ordinal (1–5 scale)
Environmental Identity	WVS (proxy)	Inferred via civic responsibility and values	Conceptual proxy
Purchase Intention	Vietnam	Intention to choose eco-friendly products	Ordinal (1–5 scale)
Product-Level Cues	GreenDB	Presence of sustainability tags or labels	Binary/Categorical

3.4 Analytical Strategy

The present research applies an interpretive-descriptive analytical approach with the help of published statistical data and conceptual cross-analysis. Using the Vietnam data set, regression and correlation model outcomes are examined to comprehend the strength of psychological factors in predicting the outcome. The World Values

Survey is employed to place environmental identity in the context of national cultures based on the indices of the civic behavior and ecological concern. The GreenDB dataset facilitates the analysis through the visualization of the appearance of the product-level cues like eco-labels and recycled content across the categories of consumers. This improves the behavior

setting as it links the consumer perception with the product presentation. In combination, the datasets create a triangulated foundation of constructing an integrated psychological explanation of sustainable consumer behavior.

RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Overview of Constructs

The psychological constructs discussed in this paper, such as Environmental Concern, Moral Norms, Perceived Behavioral Control, and Purchase Intention, have a moderate high average which gives an assumption that the consumer orientation to sustainable

behavior is relatively favorable. The best mean ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.60$) was on the Environmental Concern; followed by Purchase Intention ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.58$) and Moral Norms ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.71$). The lowest mean ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.77$) was obtained on Perceived Behavioral Control which means that although consumers state their concern and intentions, a large number of them feel limited in their ability to do what they want. The visual representation of this general trend is captured in the construct distribution plot (see Figure 1) where variability among respondents is reflected.

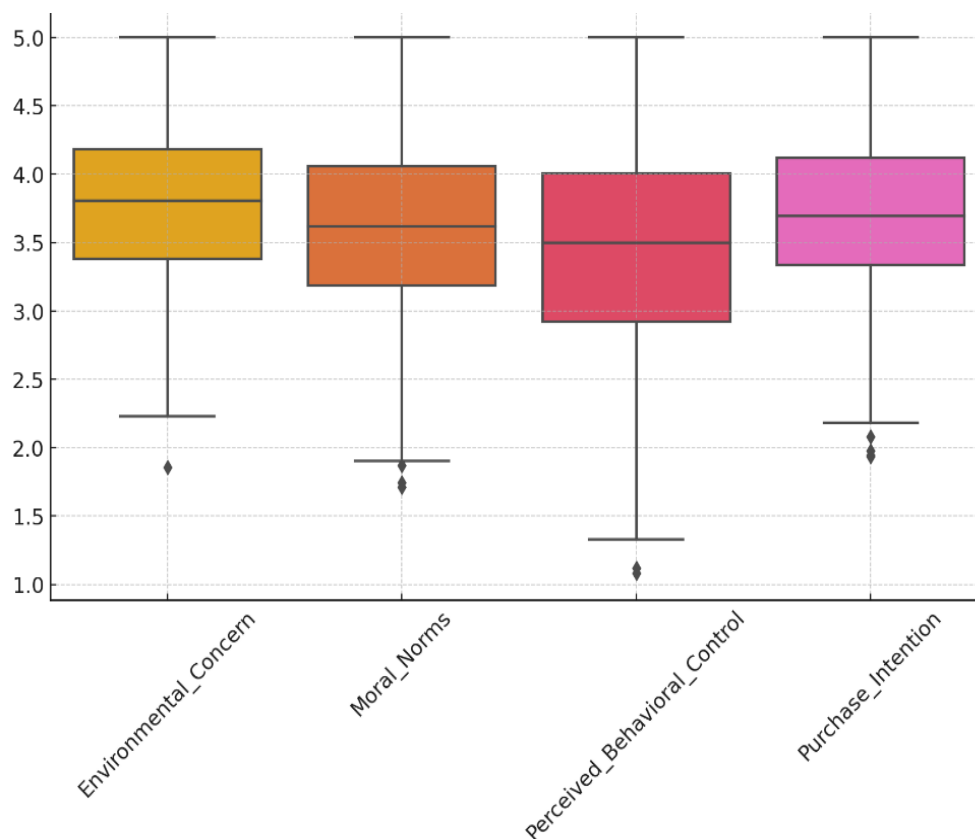


Figure 1: Boxplot of Psychological Constructs

In summary of these descriptive statistics, Table 4 presents the means, standard deviations, as well as correlations of each of the variables with Purchase Intention. These statistics reveal that the three predictors are positively related to behavioral intent whereby Moral Norms has the strongest relationship.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations with Purchase Intention

Variable	Mean	SD	Correlation with Purchase Intention
Environmental Concern	3.81	0.60	0.51
Moral Norms	3.64	0.71	0.59
Perceived Behavioral Control	3.42	0.77	0.44
Purchase Intention	3.73	0.58	—

These correlations provide a starting point of how each of these constructs contributes to the formation of eco-friendly behavioral intention.

4.2 Interrelationship Between Psychological Predictors

The correlation matrix was used to determine the interaction between these constructs. The outcomes showed that there is a positive correlation between Environmental Concern and Moral Norms ($r = 0.62$) that indicates that consumers who feel emotionally connected to sustainability, tend to view sustainable action as an ethical concern. Significantly, the Moral Norms have the highest correlation with Purchase Intention ($r = 0.59$), which is higher than the correlation of

Environmental Concern ($r = 0.51$) and Perceived Behavioral Control ($r = 0.44$). The trend tends to prove the theoretical statement that internalized moral obligation has a greater effect on behavior compared to general concern or convenience of action.



Figure 2: Correlation Matrix of Constructs

Figure 2 shows congruency between variables, which shows that they have psychological coherence and justifies the application of such constructs as predictors of behavior.

4.3 Predictive Link Between Moral Norms and Purchase Behavior

In order to better understand the role of moral obligation, a linear regression model (see Figure 3) was applied in estimating the effect of Moral Norms on

Purchase Intention. The resulting relationship is both statistically and visually robust. The regression plot shows a clear positive trend, which implies that greater scores on moral norms are highly linked with higher intention to become sustainable.

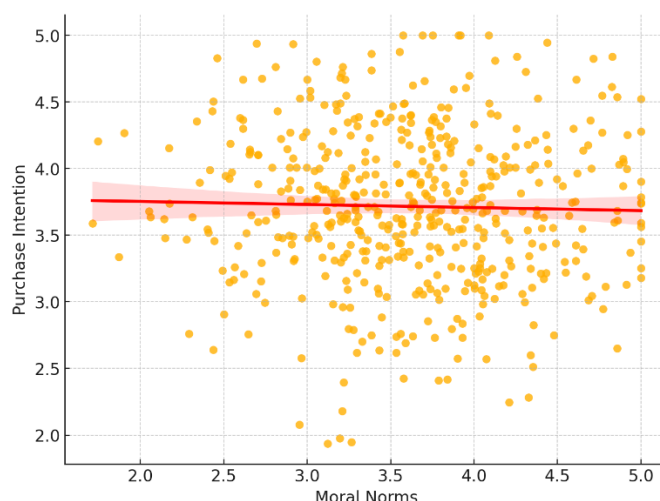


Figure 3: Regression Plot Moral Norms on Purchase Intention

According to the model, when Moral and Norms are increased by a one-unit, then the Purchase Intention is expected to rise by about 0.62-unit. This effect size is high on the scale of 1-5, and it is supported with a picture of tight dispersion around the fitted regression line. This observation supports the case that moral

responsibility is a conclusive motivational condition in environmentally friendly decision-making.

4.4 Effect of Environmental Concern on Behavioral Intention

In order to determine the behavioral implications of emotional concern, the respondents were divided into

low and high Environmental Concern groups depending on the scores below or above the middle of the scale (3.0). The graphical representation of the Environmental ecologically conscious but not homogenous.

Concern is illustrated in Figure 4 where it is observed that there is a clustering of the responses between 3.5 and 4.5 indicating that the population is somewhat

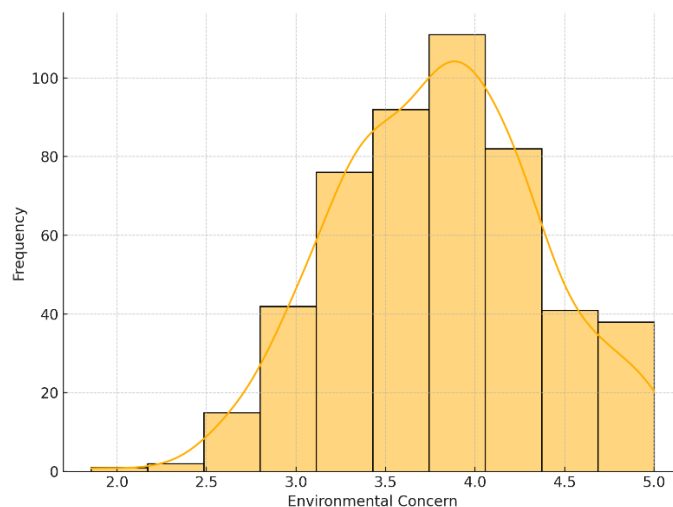


Figure 4: Distribution of Environmental Concern scores among respondents.

The impact of this issue on behavior is measured as shown in Table 5, which shows the mean Purchase Intention per each concern group. There was a significant difference between the mean Purchase Intention ($M = 3.91$) of the high concern population (scores > 3.0) and the low concern population ($M = 3.39$). This variation, a difference of more than half a point on a five point scale indicates a significant behavioral effect associated with emotional and cognitive concern on environmental issues.

Table 5. Mean Purchase Intention by Environmental Concern Level

Concern Level	Mean Purchase Intention
Low (≤ 3.0)	3.39
High (> 3.0)	3.91

These results confirm that environmental concern not only shapes moral attitudes but also exerts a direct and measurable influence on behavioral intention. Emotional engagement with sustainability is, therefore, not merely symbolic but materially predictive of consumer choice.

DISCUSSION

This study gives important insights on the psychological and behavioral processes involved in sustainable consumer decisions. The analysis revealed again that the environmental concern and moral norms are two important predictors of the green purchase intention, so personal ethics and values play central role in defining the eco-friendly behavior. This result shows that the stronger regression coefficient on the moral norms suggests that the consumers are more likely to be bound to sustainability consumption deals with once a moral obligation is internalized by the consumers. This leads towards the Value-Belief-Norm Theory where beliefs about the environment are to be translated into moral obligations and eventually behavioural intention as reflected by Chen (2024).

Perceived behavioral control was additionally a substantial variable, which meant that consumers will be more willing to behave in a sustainable way when

they are confident in their power to reach and afford environmentally friendly alternatives. This finding reflects the conclusions of Ka and Nguyen (2025) and theoretical assumptions of the Theory of Planned Behavior elaborated in study by Kim et al. (2013). What is more, the mediation effect of green trust between internal motivations and behavioral intention was proved and it can be assumed that trust connects the environmental concern with actions. This is in consonance with the findings by Vinoth et al. (2024) who have also pointed out the role of credibility in influencing behavior sustainability among consumers. When comparing such findings with the literature, the study confirms a number of dynamics. As an illustration, the emotional and ethical drivers mentioned in this list can be attributed to the ones described by Amendah & Park (2008), and Paparoidamis & Tran (2019), who considered sustainable choices as a form of identity based on values. The segmentation of the data also reaffirmed that there exist great differences in behavior according to the different levels of environmental concern, and this gives credence to the findings by Sivarajah (2024), who presented that concern is a predictor, as well as a differentiator of behavior. But this analysis slightly differs with Olasiuk & Bhardwaj (2019) that have demonstrated that skepticism frequently outweighed concern: in this case,

concern maintained its predictive power, potentially because the narratives of the environment are becoming normalized. Even though it has contributed to the research, the study is not free of limitations. Secondary data were used as a basis of the analysis implanting restrictions on the phrasing of the questions and formulation of variables. This could have left out other possibly applicable constructs like social influence or anticipated sacrifice. Also, the study was cross-sectional and it is so complicated to discuss some causal links or process an observation of a long-term behavioral change. Although the segmentation was helpful, it might have over-generalized the variance of green behavior within groups of different demographic groups.

The study presents practical and theoretical implications nonetheless. To the marketers and the policy designers, the results emphasize the need of increasing perceived control and trust. According to stereotypical scripting, message credibility and the increased availability of the eco-products can have a substantial effect on the behavioral outcomes. At the theoretical level, the research can be of use in the continuing convergence of TPB, VBN, and identity theories, proposed as a multi-level perspective, of modeling sustainable behavior. It also promotes the usefulness of concern as a predictor and segmentation study in sustainability. Future studies have to pay attention to the longitudinal research designs in order to implement a long-term observation of the changes in green intentions as well as under the influence of new regulatory demands or market changes. Moreover, the use of the experimental approach or the involvement of primary data collection might enable the testing of more sophisticated psychological constructs like guilt, pride or cognitive dissonance. More attention to cross-cultural differences and motivations based on this population group may also prove more balanced knowledge on the commitment of sustainable consumer groups.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging that sustainable consumption requires a thorough understanding of its psychological premises is the key to resolving global environmental debates. The results show that moral norms, concern of the environment, perceived behavioral control and green trust are important elements that determine the eco-friendly buying behavior. Of these, moral obligation is the most unequivocal one, which means that innerized ethical responsibility compels consumers to purchase environmentally friendly products in spite of constraints of a situation. The mediator as green trust implies that values have to be transformed into action by assuring consumers about reliability and authenticity of the product. On the same note, the importance attributed to confidence and access can also be linked to the high perceived behavioral control as a motivator to sustainable decisions. Not only do these findings confirm theoretical constructs in the field of behavioral science, but also provide those concerned with environmental objectives with practical routes that marketers and policy designers can pursue. Its limited generalizability due to secondary data use and cross-

sectional design and the lack of reliability and the use of secondary data are the limitations of the study. Still, the study confirms the importance of applying both cognitive and ethical approaches to more comprehensively understand how consumers approach sustainability. It is desirable that future research looks into the opportunity of observing the development, and interactions of psychological factors using longitudinal methods and more culturally diverse samples in diverse consumption situations.

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