

## Sustainable Consumption in The Digital Age: Exploring Consumer Motivations, Behaviors, And Ethical Dilemmas

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**ABSTRACT**

Customers' connection in the contemporary market regarding sustainability and their judgment towards consumption depend on social media platforms and digital payment settings. However, it is vital to understand that digital settings influence sustainability. Still, the present literature provides fewer studies on the interactions of consumer motivations, digital attitudes, and ethical predicaments in the digital environment. The study narrows the gap of earlier studies through the Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework conceptual model. It utilizes the secondary data through a thematic meta-analysis framework from academic papers and research works in journals and reviews published between 2015 to 2024. The primary outcomes show that the factors related to social and environmental issues are considerably affecting the customers' digital-oriented sustainability options, designs related behaviours, which show moderate changes towards digitalised consumption, and issues related to security of the data, exclusion of the data, and greenwashing block the sustainability schemes. It also adds to incorporating varied perceptions on customer behaviour digitally, keeping sustainability and morality into an outline, and providing recommendations on digital accountability, transparency, and ethicality in consumption to the policy makers, regulators, industries, researchers, and academicians.

**Keywords:** Digital Sustainable Consumption, Consumer Motivations, Ethical Dilemmas, Digital Behavior, Sustainability, E-commerce, Green Marketing, Ethical Consumerism, Data Privacy, Thematic Meta-synthesis, Digital Economy.

**INTRODUCTION:**

The rapid digitisation of consumer markets had a major influence on how consumers engage with brands, goods, and sustainability practices. The number of digital platforms like social media networks, e-commerce marketplaces, digital payment systems, and mobile applications has made it possible for consumers to make information-driven, convenient purchases that are also more in line with sustainability values (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019).

In order to promote ecologically sensible behaviour by permitting customers to buy green products, offering privileges through companies, and contributing to digitalization that supports ethical and environmentally approachable behaviour (Kumar & Pandey, 2023).

It raises the availability of goods and information that are maintainable, but it also produces ethical difficulties and irregularities, which make it further hard for consumers to make judgments. The uprightness of digital sustainable consumption is susceptible to difficulties such as digital overindulgence, data privacy damages, elimination of socio-digital, and green washing (de Ruyter, Keeling, & Ngo, 2020; Sheth, 2021). For instance, online advertising makes it

convenient to endorse environmentally related products in a directed manner, but the same algorithms that make suggestions can also endorse moderate consumption or misinterpret customers about sustainability. Hence, the online settings back-ups oppose the objective of accountable consumption. With the advancement of environmentally related products, an increase in the supply chain clarity and the reinforcement of circular economy philosophies, online platforms have developed as a vital factor in the attainment of SDG 12 ( UNDP, 2022). The campaigns of social media, sustainability certification creativities, and support from influencers are affecting consumer stories about ethical consumerism.

However, these developments raise important questions: Are digital technologies merely repurposing traditional consumption patterns in new digital ways, or are they genuinely encouraging sustainable consumption?

Digital sustainable consumption is the term used to describe the complex and dynamic area where behavioural, ethical, and environmental factors converge because of the convergence of sustainability and digitalisation. This new paradigm holds that consumers' moral reasoning and values are formed in

part by algorithms, influencers, online communities, and platform interfaces (Nayyar & Gupta, 2022).

Despite of addressing sustainability and digital behaviour separately, there is still an absence of scholarly understanding regarding their integration. Research on sustainable consumer motivations indicates that environmental concern, social responsibility, and personal identity all play significant roles (Biswas & Roy, 2015). Studies on digital consumer behaviour look at how technology, algorithms, and online environments affect buying decisions, while studies on ethical consumption look at moral reasoning and personal responsibility (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014) (Belk, 2021). Some studies show that there are connections among the moral dilemmas, inspirations, and consumer behaviour regarding the online consumption settings. In the arenas of consumer studies and sustainability, this distribution shows a considerable need for research. (White et al., 2021). The concern towards the environment, social accountability, and individual personality are all essential factors (Biswas & Roy, 2015). The studies on digital consumer behaviour show how technology, algorithms, and online settings affect the purchasing decisions with moral thinking and personal accountability (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014). Digital Sustainable Consumption Model complements the robust forces of digital sustainability by assimilating technological, ethical, and psychological perspectives. It draws on established theoretical underpinnings like the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ethical Consumerism Theory, and Digital Consumption Models (Ajzen, 1991).

To fulfil the study, there are three key research questions:

1. What motivates consumers to implement sustainable consumption in digital contexts?
2. How are the Sustainable practices communicated on digital platforms?
3. What ethical questions are brought up by sustainable digital consumption?

Examining how digital technologies mediate the moral, behavioural, and motivational facets of sustainable consumption is the aim of these research topics. Together, they aim to provide legislators, digital marketers, and sustainability advocates with theoretically sound insights that have practical applications.

### Research Gap

Digital platforms have evolved from being merely channels for trade to actively supporting sustainable consumption, affecting people's attitudes, actions, and evaluations of ethical options when they are online. This study synthesises fragmented literature using a theme meta-synthesis and introduces the Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework, a theoretically grounded model that integrates the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ethical Consumerism Theory, and Digital Behaviour Models. The Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework model enhances knowledge of how digital

affordances affect moral reasoning, behavioural intention, and ethical evaluation in online. Though the research on sustainable consumption is growing, but it is currently focuses on digital behaviours, motivations, and ethical dilemmas separately (White et al., 2019; Kumar & Pandey, 2023). Few studies have looked at how ethical issues like data privacy and greenwashing (de Ruyter et al., 2020; Sheth, 2021) or environmental and social incentives (Biswas & Roy, 2015) intersect in digital contexts. To fill the gap the Digital Sustainable Framework Model is proposed that serves as the lens to understand the motives, behaviours and, ethical tensions that connect through digital sustainability environments, providing an assimilated strategy to the academicians, practitioners and, policy makers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The Digital consumption models show the importance (Belk, 2021; Nayyar & Gupta, 2022) of digital impact on buying decisions, which comprises the personalised user experience, the effect of social media platforms, mobile apps, and the development of e-commerce demonstrating that the technology supports and endorses the environmentally sound practices pretension the ethical predicament, such as conspicuous consumption and digital alteration.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour serves as a behavioural model explaining how customers' behaviour and personal opinions affect their preference to contribute to sustainable undertakings (Ajzen, 1991). The peer evaluations, system-generated suggestions, and digital platform that affect the features in online settings, moreover, improve or destabilise the sustainable objectives. Hence, the theory of planned behaviour can provide an explanation for why a few consumers are efficient enough to transform their thoughts on sustainability into digital reality when superficial challenges such as price or accessibility ruin others. Further, the theory of planned behaviour is sustained by the ethical consumerism theory that explains the ethical and societal reflections, adding to the effect of buying decisions through economic viability. This shows that the ethical distinctiveness, business belief, and individual uprightness support the accountable consumption.

### 2.12 Consumer Motivations

In digital contexts, the primary forces behind sustainable consumption are identity expression, social responsibility, and environmental concern.

As more people view buying as a moral and civic duty, environmental consciousness motivates them to select eco-friendly products and reduce their ecological footprints (Biswas & Roy, 2015) the peer networks and online communities' value and encourage sustainability towards the societal responsibility. This type of digital social influence reinforces pro-environmental views and encourages observance to sustainable standards through likes, shares, and endorsements (White, Lin, & Dahl,

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2021). The identity-based motivation theory, which maintains that self-concept and social recognition cooperate to promote environmentally friendly choices, is in line with this phenomenon (Kumar & Pandey, 2023). Digital sustainable consumption has deeply psychosomatic as well as useful motivations since it integrates social belonging, personal ethics, and digital visibility.

### 2.13 Consumer Behaviors in the Digital Age

Digital technology has caused a shift in consumer behaviour from physical to hybrid consumption ecosystems. A shift towards accountability in digital e-commerce is shown in the raising the number of consumers participating in sharing economies, online green purchasing, and second-hand markets (Nayyar & Gupta, 2022; Belk, 2021)

### 2.14 Ethical Dilemmas

Though there is rise in sustainability awareness, it also undergoes the ethical challenges. The problems like greenwashing, data ethics and data inequality where the businesses are used to misled consumers, manipulation of security and restriction in accessing the technology. The refraining of lesser income customers from benefiting the premium pricing or failed to access the online marketing for sustainable products shows the societal inequality. (UNDP, 2022). This shows that there is a need for robust policy framework that is based on ethical consumption bridge the ethicality and ecological related objectives. (de Ruyter, Keeling, & Ngo, 2020; Sheth, 2021).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This study assimilates information from the existing 52 peer-reviewed literature on digital sustainable consumption through a theme meta-synthesis and a qualitative secondary data analysis approach from 2015 to 2024. For blending the outcomes from different review studies, a meta-theme synthesis is suitable, which identifies, compares, and interprets the persistent outlines, theories, and links towards the concepts (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Utilizing this design, the study represents that the pragmatic examination by apprehending the interface between customers' motivations, online, and moral apprehensions. (Moher et al., 2009).

### 3.12 Data Collection

Credible reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, and working papers from prestigious academic databases

like Web of Science, Scopus, and Emerald Insight provide the data.

### 3.13 Data Analysis

The data collected is analysed by coding classifying through the software NVivo. Three steps made up the thematic meta-synthesis process:

Open coding: It is the first step in coding recurrent ideas, concepts, and insights from various studies, such as consumer incentives, behavioural trends, and moral considerations.

Axial Coding: This method creates conceptual connections and identifies patterns within and between digital consumption contexts by grouping related codes into higher-order categories.

Selective Coding: It is the process of using categories to develop overarching themes that align with the proposed Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework.

### 3.14 Validation

Different Techniques such as triangulation, cross-contextual evaluation and peer verification, where the conceptual framework, theoretical outlines, Meta evaluation in the areas of sustainability and digital buying behaviour of the consumer are investigated. This provides the outcome across different online platform, locations of geographical oriented and consumer classification. Further the verification through consultants to examine the precision and application of the blended concepts. This method shows the ethical difficulties and struggles faced in current online environment systems while assuring that the study offers a complete justification of the online platforms that impact the sustainable consumption behaviour

### 3.15 Contribution of the Methodology

The methodology expedites in resulting of

- Ascertaining the innovative concepts like ecological conscious, tech induced disruption and ethical digital identity.
- Linking the features of behavioural, ethical, and technical into a particular model called the Digital Sustainable Framework Model.
- Offering academicians, researchers, policy makers, and online retailers with information related to theory and practice oriented to enhance the upgradation of accountability, morality, and transparency towards digital market consumption.

## RESULTS

**TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF THEMATIC DOMAINS AND FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION**

THEMATIC DOMAIN	SUB-THEMES IDENTIFIED	FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES (N=52)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Motivational Drivers	Environmental awareness, social identity, digital advocacy	21	40.4%
Behavioural Expressions	Green purchasing, digital nudges, e-commerce sustainability	17	32.7%

Ethical Dilemmas	Greenwashing, privacy, and digital inequality	14	26.9%
Total	—	52	100%

Interpretation: Those who showed a strong commitment to values and the influence of being involved in the digital community on sustainability decisions were the most noticeable motivators. The behavioural and ethical factors that closely follow show that digital participation can both promote and hinder sustainable consumption.

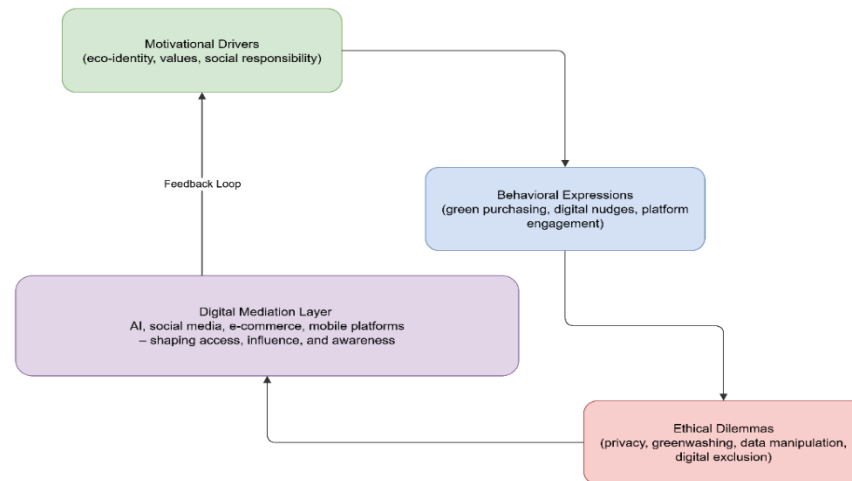
**TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES AND REPRESENTATIVE FINDINGS**

CORE THEME	REPRESENTATIVE CODES / CONCEPTS	ILLUSTRATIVE EVIDENCE FROM STUDIES	INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY
Eco-Identity & Social Influence	Peer support, online communities, and a green self-image	White, Lin & Dahl (2021); Belk (2021)	Digital identity construction reinforces sustainability norms through peer validation and community involvement (White, Lin & Dahl, 2021; Belk, 2021).
Digital Convenience & Conscious Choices	E-commerce sustainability labels, ethical product filters, and app-based.	Kumar & Pandey (2023); Nayyar & Gupta (2022)	Platforms encourage sustainable behaviours by fusing information transparency, visibility, and ease of use
Intention–Behavior Gap	Ethical fatigue and a disconnect between values and behaviour	Carrington et al. (2014); Biswas & Roy (2015)	In digital contexts, consumers often revert to convenience-focused options, even when they express a desire for sustainability.
Algorithmic Ethics & Data Privacy	Monitoring, control, and personalisation bias	Sheth (2021); de Ruyter et al. (2020)	AI-powered recommendation engines prioritise convenience
Digital Inequality & Exclusion	Literacy obstacles and the disparity in accessibility	UNDP (2022); Verhoef et al. (2021)	Benefits of sustainable consumerism are not equally accessible due to socio-digital disparities.

**TABLE 3: VALIDATION OF THEMATIC SYNTHESIS**

VALIDATION TECHNIQUE	PURPOSE	IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	OUTCOME
Triangulation	Verify that it is reliable and consistent	Codes that were compared to meta-analyses and sustainability frameworks (e.g., SDG 12)	Themes validated and consistent with the global sustainability conversation
Cross-Contextual Assessment	Check for generalisability in different settings	The outcomes of developed (EU/US) and emerging (India/ASEAN) markets were contrasted	Confirmed common patterns but context-specific ethical dilemmas

**FIGURE 1: THE DIGITAL SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION FRAMEWORK (DSCF)**



This model shows how three thematic domains, motivational drivers, ethical dilemmas, and behavioural expressions, interplay dynamically across ecosystems that consume digital content. The intermediate layer of digital technicality enables and constrains the sustainable decision-making among the consumers. Some of the driving factors behind these behaviours like using green platforms and making ethical purchases are moral obligation, social identity, and environmental consciousness. However, these behaviours are constantly obstructed by ethical dilemmas related to privacy, greenwashing, and digital injustices. The feedback loops demonstrate how moral dilemmas change incentives and behaviour in the future, making digital

It emphasises that digital sustainability is a negotiated and recursive process rather than a straight line.

## DISCUSSIONS

### 5.1 Motivational Patterns

It is found that Gen Z and Millennial customers are more environmentally conscious and intend to buy products that are sustainable, as per this study. (White, Lin, & Dahl, 2021; Kumar & Pandey, 2023). These customers value social accountability in purchasing products sustainably. In the online buying communities, it is found that buying sustainable goods is a matter of social recognition and ethicality. The digital commitment considerably enhances the motivators by encouraging participation in digital forums, social media, and backing the operations that provide a platform for discussing, learning, and taking action. (Belk, 2021; Nayyar & Gupta, 2022).

### 5.12 Behavioural Patterns

The e-commerce industry in India represents the trends through concrete actions. Myntra's sustainability label advertises the eco-friendly clothing, while Amazon's "Climate Pledge Friendly" campaign represents the ecologically certified products and provides clarity and guidance for consumer choices (Kumar & Pandey, 2023). By boosting awareness, decreasing choice fatigue, and making it easier to identify green products, these attributes serve as platform-mediated nudges that gently promote sustainable behaviours (Belk, 2021).

By exposing users to eco-friendly subscription models, second-hand platforms, and sharing economy services, digital marketplaces also encourage behavioural experimentation. (Nayyar & Gupta, 2022; White *et al.*, 2021).

### 5.13 Ethical Tensions

Apart from benefits, there are imperative moral reasons with digital sustainable consumption where the accessibility and ecological accountability cannot exist, such as the selection of accelerated shipping might increase the carbon emissions as an outcome against the effectiveness and sustainability (de Ruyter, Keeling, & Ngo, 2020). Even though the AI-enabled tailor-made systems with suggestions enhance the consumer's expertise and provide eco-friendly judgments, which nurture confidentiality, observing and operating challenges (Sheth, 2021; Gupta & Nayyar, 2022), the ethical problems have become tough due to the concept of the digital divide. There are limitations faced by customers belonging to low-income or technically non-advanced groups towards access to the products and platforms related to sustainability, as it restricts their usage in participating in accountable consumption, inclusivity, and equity distribution (UNDP, 2022).

### 5.14 The Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework

1. It offers a complete viewpoint for exploring digital sustainable consumption settings by adapting behaviours, motivations, and ethicality. Societal accountability, identity, and ecological apprehension are some of the examples that motivate the elements that affect the customer's inclination towards ethical consumption.
2. Selection of products that are environmentally cooperative, contribution in platforms, adaption of the digital consumption patterns are some instances of behavioural expressions.
3. Ethical concerns related to privacy related challenges, legitimate sustainable practices and CSR that provide feedback, which affect the choices

and hamper the motivation towards the customer buying behaviour.

By incorporating the technical, ethicality, behavioural elements, the DSCF provides an analytical outline, which provides understanding towards digital sustainable consumption by highlighting the impact of objectives, and outcomes of the online ecosystems towards the sustainability enabled customer's behavioural patterns. The shift offers how the technical expertise digitally serve as intervene. To encourage behaviours related to sustainability the platforms utilise the effect of the social media. This serves as essential requisite for academicians' researchers, policy makers, and retail marketers by inspiring ethicality, transparency and accountable consumption in the digital era.

## IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study, in the first place, unites the unequal patches into robust models with online buying behaviour, morality in consumption, and motivates the sustainability. As per the model of Digital Sustainable consumption, the online platforms serve as interveners affecting the approaches and apparent control on behaviour through features like eco labels, green certifications, ethical badges, user-generated content, personalised suggestions, content discovery platforms, and prediction algorithms.

Secondly, with online morality struggles like data due diligence, impartial data, and unethical framing, which serve as essential elements for making judgments related to morality, the outline develops on the theory related to ethical consumerism, where the morality judgment is prejudiced by technical expertise, ethical consumption in digital settings based on product and platform morality.

Thirdly, the Digital Sustainable Consumption model offers an ecology identification, push accountability and feedback loops from experience related to legitimate ethical practices and CSR. (White et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

### 6.12 Managerial and Policy Implications

The Digital Sustainable Consumption model offers the regulators, policy makers, and online platform creators with various information, irrespective of being conceptual.

1. Digital marketing and e-commerce platforms: The model represents the need of transparency such as environment friendly labels, carbon footprint indicators and societal impact indicators such as peer suggestions and public commitment. Assimilating these features can rise the belief and trust among the customers, motivate the attitude towards sustainability and responsible consumption (Kumar & Pandey, 2023).
2. Policy Design: Policy guidelines must focus on equity and security related digitalisation that provide ethical sustainable accountable

consumption (de Ruyter, Keeling, & Ngo, 2020; UNDP, 2022). The Regulators use the information of Digital Sustainable consumption framework to provide suggestions for ethicality in using AI, online literacy programmes and categorising to reduce the differences in ethicality and enrich the platform accountability.

3. Techniques for Engaging Customers: To motivate sustainable judgement, the platforms can make the community related mediation by enhancing the ethical judging through societal guidelines, peer reviews and together using of social media, email, and websites, to promote a cause, influence public opinion, and mobilize support for a specific campaign or issue. By going through the feedback between behaviours, motivations, and ethicality, practitioners can retain commitment while offering responsible consumption.

### 6.13 Limitations and Future Research Directions:

#### Limitations are as follows:

1. Secondary data is used for the study: For the study, secondary data is used.
2. Contextual Variability: A significant amount of the reviewed literature is area-specific (e.g., North America, Europe, or India), which may limit generalisability across platform types, digital ecosystems, and cultural contexts.
3. Rapid Technological Evolution: Since new technologies and digital business, models may alter consumption patterns more quickly than published research can record, the framework may need to be updated regularly.

To advance theory and empirical validation, testable hypotheses derived from the Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework are released:

- P1: Customers with a strong eco-identity are more responsive to digital sustainability cues (like carbon footprint labelling) than consumers motivated only by social norms.
- P2: Compared to non-personalised settings, the motivation-behavior link is more compromised when exposed to greenwashing in algorithmically chosen feeds.
- P3: Because they restrict their efficacy due to perceived data privacy risks, high privacy concerns weaken the persuasiveness of tailored sustainability nudges.

Future studies can use experimental designs, eye-tracking studies on e-commerce interfaces, longitudinal consumption tracking, and cross-cultural surveys to verify these claims.

## CONCLUSION

The digital platforms have the ability to be advantageous as well be a hindrance for the sustainability consumption as per this study. The Social and environmental features engage commitment where at times the ethicality and

technical perspectives influence the behaviour of the buyers. The Digital Sustainable Consumption Framework offers an overall outline that interrelates the schemes, attitudes and ethicality resulting in transparent digitalisation of the markets. This model provides researchers, policy makers, regulators transparency and recommends the integration among the ecology oriented identification, digital platforms and ethicality. Finally, the study builds the base for future study to enhance the transparency, ethicality and accountability in the attitudes of buyers in making judgment and narrowing the difference found in the previous literature on ethical judgement, sustainability in consumption and online buying behaviour

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