



Research Article

## A Conceptual Study on Green Product Knowledge, Consumer Trust, And Sustainable Buying Behaviour

Dr. Suman Yadav<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Gajendra Kumar Gupta<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Applied Science and Humanities, BIET, Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email: [drsumanbetwaa@gmail.com](mailto:drsumanbetwaa@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Technical University, Lucknow  
Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: \* Dr. Suman Yadav

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### Abstract

While the world rushes to become more sustainable, there is a strong attitude-behaviour gap in the emerging markets when it comes to green products. There is a growing awareness of the environment but sustainable buying behaviours are still limited due to the widespread greenwashing, infrastructure and institutional distrust. This conceptual paper integrates the existing literature and presents a theoretical framework that connects the constructs of green product knowledge, consumer trust and sustainable buying behaviour in the context of emerging markets. The paper is based on an extended theoretical model that combines the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Signalling Theory and Institutional Theory as a basis for the cognitive antecedent of green product knowledge. But this knowledge does not just have an immediate effect on behaviour; it works best by promoting consumer confidence. Trust is the psychological conduit that validates corporate environmental claims in low-trust environments that are characteristic to many emerging economies, that helps reduce perceived purchase risks and that helps to resolve cognitive dissonance. This study helps to provide conceptual boundaries of these links and to differentiate subjective knowledge from objective knowledge, thereby improving the theory of sustainable marketing. Moreover, it provides strategic, non-quantitative suggestions to the policy makers, brand managers, and regulators that can help create real and trustworthy green consumption. The paper ends with a comprehensive agenda for future qualitative, longitudinal and mixed methods studies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable consumption is a central element of modern environmental policy, business strategy and international development targets due to the internationalization of ecological problems. Ecological problems have escalated to a global level, which has put sustainable consumption at the heart of environmental policy, corporate strategies and global development targets. Developed economies have historically been the leading ones in the development of the green market and setting up a sustainable consumption framework; however, the emerging markets are the most dynamic and critical one for future growth. These regions are marked by a rapidly growing middle class, rapid and massive urbanisation and greater digital connectivity; they are the key to meeting global sustainability goals. As a result of the large size of consumption growth in the emerging economies, the environmental consequences of this growth will be amplified, and will be disproportionately shaped by the behavior of the consumers in these regions.

But there are a long-standing and severe paradox in the consumer markets: consumer awareness of environmental issues has been proven and has been steadily increasing, while the actual uptake of sustainable consumption is low. This has been called the "attitude-behavior gap" and this is a particularly unambiguous issue in emerging economies where a combination of structural, economic and psychological factors creates an unusual gap between the two. Among these are the myriad instances of "greenwashing," in which companies pump up or outright lie about their environmental impact, or make claims that are entirely unsubstantiated.

Consumers have a natural tendency to feel skeptical of corporate sustainability stories in countries with weak, underfunded, and divided regulations for eco-labeling. Therefore, simply being aware of environmental issues or a general pro-environmental attitude do not appear to be enough to motivate consumers to make purchasing decisions. To authorize the consumers, they need strong cognitive and affective assurance to confirm green claims.

This conceptual paper looks at this pivotal moment and explores the complex relationship between the knowledge of green products, consumer trust and sustainable purchasing. Previous studies have largely documented the direct, linear relationship between environmental awareness and green purchase in developed countries, but the psychological mechanisms between cognition and behavior in developing countries are under-theorized. Specifically, consumer trust is a mediator variable between abstract knowledge and concrete action, so it is needed to be studied more conceptually.

This paper brings together the latest scholarly debates and incorporates several theoretical perspectives to create a comprehensive conceptual framework. It seeks to address a key question: In the emerging market, how does the knowledge of green products impact sustainable buying behaviors and how does consumer trust fit into this transition? By providing new theoretical perspectives for researchers and strategic and practical advice for practitioners facing the challenges of green marketing in developing countries, the paper highlights the practical implications.

## 2. Theoretical foundations and literature synthesis.

This theoretical approach takes into account the complexity of sustainable consumption in emerging markets, and is grounded on a synthesis of three complementary theories: the Theory of Planned Behavior, Signaling Theory and Institutional Theory.

### 2.1 The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Theory of Planned Behavior assumes that human behaviors is influenced by three considerations: behavioral beliefs (attitude towards behaviors), normative belief (subjective norm), control factors (perceived behavioral control). Knowledge, in the context of green consumption, can affect the cognitive evaluation of the product and consequently affect their attitude to purchase it. If a consumer is informed about the ecologic advantages of a product, he/she is more likely to have a positive attitude towards the purchase of the product, in theory. But TPB doesn't adequately explain behaviors in settings where there is lots of information asymmetry and deception. It makes assumptions that are often not met in emerging markets where there is widespread 'greenwashing'.

### 2.2 Signalling Theory

Signalling Theory is a theory that addresses the problems with TPB in information-asymmetric situations. It argues that when a product's quality (or in this case its environmental integrity) is not easily discerned before being purchased, the best way that the sellers can send "signals" to the buyer is to be credible. For the consumer to interpret these signals, they need to have the cognitive tools to 'decode' them: a form of green product knowledge. Green product knowledge is the cognitive tool that a consumer needs to 'decode' these signals. It may be third party eco-certification, transparency around the supply chain or even carbon footprint disclosures that are verified. If a consumer can decode a credible signal with his or her existing knowledge, there will be no perceived risk and hence consumer trust that will lead to the behavioral outcome.

### 2.3 Institutional Theory

The macro-level context is provided by the Institutional Theory which explains the emerging markets. It emphasizes the importance of "institutional voids" – the lack of or insufficient strength of intermediaries, regulatory rules, and contract enforcement mechanisms to assist in market transactions. It is common in many emerging economies that there is a lack of overarching, trustworthy institution to guarantee corporate environmental claims, or the so-called institutional void in the environmental regulation. This means that it is the responsibility of the single consumer to bear the loads of verifying. This theoretical perspective is useful in understanding the fact that level of trust in the institutions is low and thus interpersonal and/or brand-specific trust is an absolute prerequisite for sustainable purchasing.

The multidimensionality of green product knowledge is highlighted. The multi-dimensionality of green product knowledge is emphasized. Green product knowledge isn't set in stone. The difference between what consumers say they know (subjective knowledge) and what they actually know (objective knowledge) is distinguished in contemporary literature, the

latter being measurable by factual tests. In emerging markets, the subjective knowledge may be exaggerated by superficial marketing campaigns and give people a false sense of expertise. Objective knowledge is an understanding of the impacts of the lifecycle, of where materials are sourced, and the capacity to critically consider eco-labels. Objective knowledge, not subjective confidence, is what is powerful enough to help consumers navigate “greenwashed” markets and develop a level of trust in the brands that are truly sustainable.

Consumer trust in low trust environments is dynamic. Consumer trust in low trust environments is fluid. In the context of green marketing, trust is the consumer's willingness to believe the green claims of a brand, because of the consumer's trust in the competence, benevolence and honesty of the brand. There are two types of trust – cognitive (rational assessment of evidence) and affective (emotional connection and shared values). In emerging markets, there have been enough instances of corporate malfeasance and lax regulation to build up a level of consumer doubt. Hence, there isn't 'free trust,' it must be 'earned' and 'scrutinized very carefully.

There is a growing focus in scholarly discussions of the fact that objective product knowledge is one of the major factors in cognitive trust. The more consumers understand and are able to check the information regarding eco-claims, the less vulnerable they are to misinformation. With this cognitive empowerment it creates a sense of confidence in the brand, making the skepticism into trust. If consumers don't trust that the products they buy won't disappoint on a functional level, be they more educated or not, they don't purchase them because they fear they will disappoint. If consumers do not believe that the product will not disappoint them, whether or not they are well-informed, they do not buy the product because they fear it will disappoint.

A number of factors affect sustainable buying behavior. There are many factors that influence sustainable buying behavior. Sustainable buying behavior is the regular and routine purchase of products and/or services that have the lowest possible negative environmental effects. The price premium for real green products, the lack of physical and/or digital access to sustainable alternatives, and the lack of trust in them stand together to make this behavior more difficult in emerging markets. Once trust is achieved, however, it can serve as a tremendous catalyst. It reduces the risk of perceived risks of green products, leading to greater willingness to accept a premium, more active selection of sustainable products instead of conventional ones, and positive word of mouth.

### **3. The proposed conceptual framework, as well as the associated propositions, can be seen below:**

Synthesizing the literature and incorporating the theories, a comprehensive conceptual model is developed that outlines the relations between the key constructs. The theoretical propositions represent a framework of the causal pathways and intervening factors present.

**Proposition 1:** There is a direct connection between knowledge and behaviour.

Green Product Knowledge has a positive effect on Sustainable Purchasing behavior.

Increased understanding by consumers of powerful and objective information on the environmental impacts of products places them in a better position to match their environmental values to their buying choices. This understanding lessens the mental load when it comes to finding sustainable solutions, making it easier to enter the green purchasing market. It makes the process of finding and evaluating green products more manageable and actionable, thereby increasing perceived behavioural control, one of the components of the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

#### **Proposition 2: How knowledge affects trust**

Knowledge of the 'green product' positively affects consumers' trust in 'green brands'.

Knowledge is a weapon in the hands of the consumers to assess and validate the corporate environmental claims and it's a decoder for market signals. A consumer who can easily check a brand's sustainability statements on their own, with respect to recognized certifications and/or transparent data, will lose their trust. This process helps to build cognitive trust from abstract awareness. The brand has evolved from making a marketing claim to one whose claims can be substantively supported with an objective, which increases reliability and honesty.

#### **Proposition 3: The effect of trust on action (behaviour)**

Consumer trust has a positive effect on sustainable consumer buying behaviour.

Trust can be described as a basic mechanism for reducing risk in the decision-making process of consumers. Green products can be more expensive and have unverified performance claims increasing the perceived financial and functional risk of the buyer. Consumers are less likely to be fooled by greenwashing when they think that the brand is trustworthy in its environmental claims. This psychological barrier ensures that consumers will also purchase the product, even if the other products are not as expensive, and will increase brand loyalty.

#### **Proposition 4: Trust as a mediator.**

Consumer trust acts as a mediator between the relationship between green product knowledge and sustainable buying behaviour.

Knowledge is the cognitive underpinning for green consumption, but it does not necessarily lead to purchase. Trust is vital, or even a necessary component, of knowledge, it can result in significant cynicism; knowing what makes a product green doesn't mean a consumer will actually purchase it if he or she believes commercial motives or has been “tricked” before. This effect may be called the "skeptical expert effect. However, when consumers are using greenness knowledge to check whether a product has the attributes that it claims to have, this increases trust and this might, in turn, stimulate the actual buying. Thus, trust is the psychological link that connects knowledge and behavior.

#### 4. The audience has the opportunity to discuss and make theoretical contributions.

The conceptual synthesis has a few unique and important contributions to the sustainable marketing and consumer behavior literature.

This takes analysis beyond the straight linear path of direct effect of the environment on environmental awareness and also adds a more complex and mediated path. It makes a good account of the fact that in some cases, informed consumers in emerging markets do not purchase green products, as it reflects the psychological factor which is trust, at the critical link. Sometimes lack of awareness is not the issue – sometimes it is a lack of institutional or brand-level trust. This takes care of a long-standing 'anomaly' in the literature on attitude-behavior relationship.

Second, the Signaling Theory plus Institutional Theory plus the classic Theory of Planned Behavior is a more powerful, context rich explanation of emerging markets. It recognizes that in such environments where there is a lot of information asymmetry and institutional gaps, cognitive awareness (knowledge) needs to be accompanied by credible and verifiable market signals in order to create affective and cognitive assurance (trust) to spur behaviors change. These three theories have the potential to be more realistic in the consumer decision making process in developing economies.

Thirdly, this paper explicitly places the green consumption discourse in the idiosyncrasies of one-off institutions in emerging economies. Overcomes the ethnocentric mind-set of assuming that strategies that were successful in developed markets can be applied anywhere. It reveals the unique significance of mechanisms of trust-building in territories where claims are not yet regulated, and where consumers are their own regulatory auditor.

Finally, it is more clear than subjective versus objective green product knowledge, which provides a foundation for more specific empirical studies in the future. The marketing of knowledge which seeks to subjectivize knowledge will have a negative impact in the long run, it argues, because it will leave people without the capacity to check the information objectively.

#### 5. The implications for management and suggestions for policy are explained.

The proposed conceptual framework provides actionable, strategic and highly nuanced insights for different stakeholders looking to promote sustainable consumption in emerging markets.

Practicing Radical Transparency: Aesthetic, emotive or generic “eco-friendly” language is creating an opposite effect and may raise questions about the product from consumers. Brands need to give tangible, measurable, and readily available information about sustainability initiatives. This involves reporting on the reduction of carbon footprint, ethical sourcing indicators and water consumption data.

Trust third party and trusted signals: Invest in third party and recognized, independent and internationally or locally respected eco certification is crucial. These certifications are good and easily readable indicators that a consumer has the information

literacy, which can be checked, and therefore a direct link between theory and confidence.

Invest in Empowering Consumer Education: Marketing should not only sell consumer the product, it's all about educating the consumer. Brands need to create content that is accessible, and that helps to build objective knowledge of green products, e.g. a guide to understanding an eco-label or a guide to understanding a product's lifecycle. With the empowerment of the consumer, the brands create the very trust they are looking for in order to sell.

Digital traceability of products, for example, by using blockchain or QR code data chains, ensures that the consumer can be assured about the product's origin from raw materials to sale. The transparency directly addresses the concerns of greenwashing, since they are directly linked to lack of information.

Clear and standardized definitions of environmental claims and legal protection for environmental claims from regulatory bodies is needed. There are a large number of labels that claim to be “green,” but are not verified by a third party, which have reduced the effectiveness of existing third-party labels and misled consumers.

Effective accountability must be applied and be clear and visibly enforced. This will bring consumer confidence in the market to a higher baseline level, and make the market healthier and more agreeable to real green businesses.

Encourage education: Governments and NGOs should design and encourage educational activities, based on scientific environmental information and education, incorporate in public school curriculum and raise consumer awareness to prepare the next generation of consumers with the knowledge and tools to understand the market signals.

For Digital Platforms & Retailers:

Ecommerce companies should engage actively in curation for ‘sustainable’ shop front and ask the sellers for proof of sustainability processes before implementing them on the green tags/filter.

Improve capability to provide detailed, validated peer reviews targeted at product durability and environmental performance that can be used to leverage social proof and drive collective trust.

#### 6. Conclusion and Future research directions are presented-

##### 6.1 CONCLUSION

The overall idea of this conceptual paper is that sustainable purchasing behavior in the emerging markets cannot be realized with environmental awareness or with a short-term marketing approach. With the ubiquitous presence of greenwashing and institutional voids, there is need for a more intricate consumer-action psychological route. Consumer trust, which is the result of knowing a product is green, is the cognitive validation needed to trigger real purchasing behavior, whereas the cognitive base is provided by green product knowledge. Without trust, there is cynicism but with verified trust, which is transparent, there is sustainable purchasing. If the green economy is to have a transformative impact in emerging markets it will require all actors to focus on transparency,

credible and verifiable evidence, and consumer empowerment, as well as innovation in the products.

## 6.2 Future Research Directions

This paper is a conceptual contribution, and provides a foundation for further comprehensive and deep empirical research. The research paths outlined provide the academic community with the opportunities to build fine-grained, actionable and culturally relevant knowledge about sustainable consumption that will help achieve global environmental goals.

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### About the Corresponding Author

**Dr. Suman Yadav** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Science and Humanities at BIET, Jhansi, India. With extensive experience in teaching and research, Dr. Yadav specialises in interdisciplinary studies within the fields of science, humanities, and higher education. Her academic contributions focus on promoting quality education, research excellence, and holistic student development.