

# A Study on Sustainable Marketing Practices and Consumer Willingness to Pay A Premium in India

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sustainable marketing has become an essential strategic approach for firms responding to rising global and Indian concerns about environmental degradation, ethical consumption, and responsible production. In the Indian marketplace, characterized by rapid urbanisation, a growing middle class, and increasing digital influence-consumers are demonstrating heightened interest in sustainability-oriented products. However, firms often face uncertainty regarding whether consumers are willing to pay a premium for such offerings. This conceptual paper examines how sustainable marketing practices (SMP), including eco-friendly product development, sustainable packaging, eco-labelling, CSR communication, ethical sourcing, and transparency in sustainability reporting, shape consumers' willingness to pay a premium (WTPP) in India. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory, Signalling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Price-Quality Inference Theory, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework linking SMP with perceived value, perceived quality, brand trust, and environmental concern. The review indicates that SMP enhance perceived value, quality, and brand trust-key mediators influencing WTPP-while environmental concern strengthens consumers' positive responses to sustainable offerings. The discussion highlights the unique socio-cultural and economic factors shaping Indian consumer behaviour, identifies barriers such as affordability and greenwashing scepticism, and outlines managerial and policy implications for fostering sustainable consumption. The paper provides theoretical clarity and practical insights, offering directions for future empirical research to validate the model and deepen the understanding of sustainable consumer behaviour in emerging economies.

**KEYWORDS:** Sustainable Marketing, Willingness to Pay a Premium, Green Consumer Behaviour, Perceived Value, Perceived Quality, Brand Trust, Environmental Concern, Eco-Labelling, Ethical Consumption

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and Context**

Sustainability has emerged as a defining concern of the twenty-first century, shaping consumer preferences, business strategies, and policy frameworks globally. Issues such as climate change, plastic pollution, resource depletion, and unethical production practices have heightened societal demand for responsible consumption and production. As a result, companies worldwide are integrating sustainability into product design, branding, supply-chain management, and communication strategies (Peattie & Belz, 2010).

Sustainable marketing- defined as the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value while ensuring economic, social, and environmental well-being-has become a mainstream strategic imperative rather than a niche practice (Belz & Peattie, 2012).

### **1.2 Sustainability and Market Dynamics in India**

India represents one of the world's fastest-growing consumer markets, characterized by rising disposable incomes, urbanization, and a digitally connected young population. Simultaneously, the country faces severe environmental challenges including air pollution, waste generation, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss. Recent surveys indicate increasing consumer concern regarding environmental issues, particularly among millennials and Gen-Z, who report a stronger preference for eco-friendly products and businesses that "do good" (EY India, 2022; Accenture, 2021). Companies in India-ranging from FMCG to textiles, automobiles, and e-commerce-have responded by adopting sustainable marketing practices such as biodegradable packaging, carbon-neutral operations, green supply-chain communication, and eco-labeling (Sangroya & Nayak, 2017).

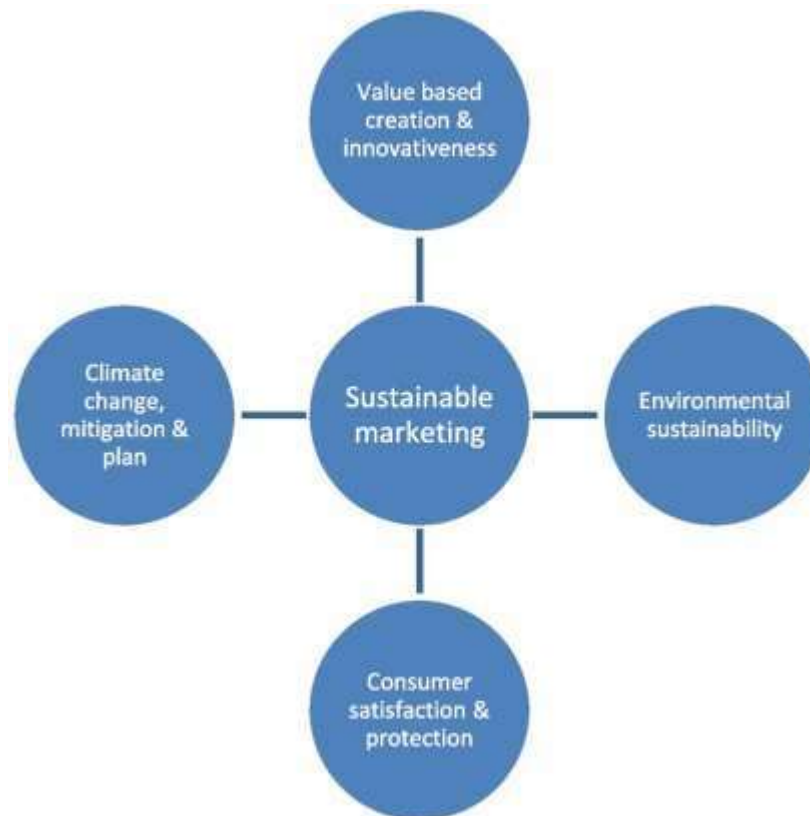
Despite these trends, the commercial viability of sustainability initiatives ultimately depends on consumers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable alternatives. This is important because sustainable products often involve higher production costs owing to green materials, certifications, ethical sourcing, or clean technologies (Biswas & Roy, 2015). Understanding the extent to which Indian consumers value sustainability-and the factors that influence their willingness to pay (WTP)-is essential for firms designing marketing strategies.

### **1.3 Importance of Willingness to Pay for Sustainable Products**

Willingness to pay a premium refers to the additional amount consumers are prepared to spend for a product that delivers environmental or ethical benefits beyond standard features (Tait et al., 2016). Studies have shown that perceived environmental value, brand trust, quality expectations, and personal norms significantly shape WTP (Nguyen et al., 2020; Haws et al., 2014). However, evidence from developing countries suggests that WTP may be constrained by affordability concerns, skepticism about green claims, and lack of awareness (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). This makes it crucial to analyze the Indian context separately rather than generalizing from global findings.

### **1.4 Need for a Conceptual and Theoretical Approach**

Given that primary data collection is not feasible in this study, there is a strong need to undertake a conceptual approach grounded in extensive secondary research. This allows for the development of a robust theoretical understanding of how sustainable marketing practices influence WTP in India. A conceptual model synthesizing insights from established behavioural theories-such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Stern, 2000), and Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973)-can illuminate the psychological pathways through which consumers interpret sustainability cues and translate them into premium willingness.



### 1.5 Purpose, Scope, and Contributions of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize how sustainable marketing practices shape consumer willingness to pay a premium in India using rigorous secondary research. Specifically, the paper aims to:

1. Review and synthesize global and Indian literature on sustainable marketing and consumer green behaviour.
2. Analyze the determinants of willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products.
3. Develop a comprehensive conceptual framework linking sustainable marketing practices, perceived value, brand trust, environmental concern, and WTP.
4. Provide theoretical and managerial insights relevant to Indian marketers and policymakers.

By focusing on India-a complex, emerging, and rapidly evolving market-this paper contributes to sustainability literature by contextualizing premium willingness in a unique socio-economic and cultural setting. It also provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical studies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Concept of Sustainable Marketing

Sustainable marketing refers to the creation, communication, and delivery of value in ways that preserve or enhance natural and social capital while ensuring long-term customer and company well-being (Belz & Peattie, 2012). It extends beyond the traditional principles of green marketing-once focused mainly on environmental benefits-by integrating economic, social, and environmental sustainability holistically (Peattie & Belz, 2010). Sustainable marketing practices typically include eco-friendly product design, responsible sourcing, reduced carbon footprint, ethical labor practices, low-impact packaging, and transparent environmental communication (Martin & Schouten, 2012).

The shift toward sustainability is driven by increased consumer awareness, global environmental

challenges, and institutional pressures, including ESG reporting norms and sustainability regulations (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). Businesses increasingly recognize sustainable marketing as central to competitive advantage, differentiation, and long-term brand equity.

## **2.2 Consumer Behaviour Toward Sustainable Products**

Global consumer trends show a growing preference for environmentally friendly and ethically produced goods (White et al., 2019). Consumers perceive sustainable products as superior in quality, healthier, safer, and socially responsible (Niinimäki, 2020). In emerging markets like India, rising urbanization and digitalization have strengthened the awareness and desirability of green products (Accenture, 2021). However, behaviour-intention gaps persist due to lower affordability, skepticism toward green claims, and inconsistent availability (Joshi & Rahman, 2015).

Indian consumers increasingly display eco-consciousness, especially in categories such as organic food, sustainable apparel, electric vehicles, and eco-friendly home-care products (Sangroya & Nayak, 2017). Nevertheless, the magnitude of sustainable behaviour varies across socio-economic groups, with younger, educated, and urban consumers showing stronger green purchase tendencies (Gupta & Ogden, 2009).

## **2.3 Understanding Willingness to Pay a Premium**

Willingness to pay a premium (WTPP) is defined as the additional monetary value a consumer is willing to sacrifice in exchange for added environmental or social benefits (Tait et al., 2016). Research indicates that WTPP is influenced by perceived product quality, perceived environmental impact, social norms, identity alignment, and trust in sustainability claims (Haws et al., 2014).

Consumers with stronger pro-environmental attitudes tend to exhibit a higher WTPP (Nguyen et al., 2020). In India, studies show consumers are willing to pay 5-15% more for sustainable attributes, especially in food, personal care, and clothing categories (Biswas & Roy, 2015). However, price sensitivity remains a barrier, particularly for lower-income groups.

## **2.4 Role of Environmental Concern and Eco-Consciousness**

Environmental concern reflects an individual's awareness of environmental issues and their willingness to contribute to environmental protection (Schultz, 2001). It is consistently identified as a key predictor of green purchase intention and WTPP (Stern, 2000). Environmentally concerned consumers are more likely to support brands with eco-friendly practices, avoid harmful products, and pay a premium to reduce ecological impact (Laroche et al., 2001).

In India, environmental concern is rising due to climate-related events, pollution-related health issues, and intensified media coverage of environmental crises (EY India, 2022). Younger consumers in particular report strong eco-conscious values and expectations from brands (Accenture, 2021).

## **2.5 Perceived Value, Quality, and Brand Trust in Sustainable Consumption Perceived Value**

Perceived value refers to the consumer's assessment of a product's utility considering benefits relative to costs (Zeithaml, 1988). Sustainable products often offer additional value in terms of environmental benefits, ethical satisfaction, and better long-term performance, which increases WTPP (Nguyen et al., 2020).

### **Perceived Quality**

Consumers frequently associate sustainability with superior quality and safety (Del Río et al., 2005). Eco-friendly packaging, natural ingredients, and certified sourcing serve as quality cues that justify premium pricing.

### **Brand Trust**

Trust plays a crucial role in green marketing, as consumers may doubt the authenticity of sustainability

claims-an issue known as greenwashing (Chen, 2010). Trustworthy brands that demonstrate transparency, third-party certifications, and consistent environmental performance gain higher WTPP (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

## 2.6 Barriers to Willingness to Pay a Premium in India

Several challenges restrict the widespread adoption of sustainable products in India:

- **High price sensitivity** among lower and middle-income consumers (Gupta & Ogden, 2009).
- **Skepticism** towards green advertising and authenticity of claims (Chen, 2010).
- **Limited availability** of sustainable alternatives outside urban centers.
- **Lack of standardized eco-labels**, leading to confusion and mistrust.
- **Low levels of environmental literacy** among older and rural populations (Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2015).

These barriers contribute to the intention-behaviour gap, a well-documented issue in sustainability research.

## 2.7 Summary of Literature Gaps

The following gaps emerge from the reviewed literature:

1. Limited focus on **Indian-specific models** explaining WTPP for sustainable products.
2. Need for **integrated conceptual frameworks** linking sustainable marketing practices with perceived value, trust, and environmental concern.
3. Insufficient understanding of **how socio-cultural and economic diversity** in India shapes WTPP.
4. Lack of comprehensive theoretical analyses that integrate **behavioural theories** with sustainable marketing.

This paper aims to address these gaps by proposing a comprehensive conceptual model grounded in established theories and Indian contextual realities.

## 3. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding how sustainable marketing practices influence consumer willingness to pay a premium (WTPP) requires a multi-theoretical approach because sustainability-related decisions involve cognitive, emotional, social, and moral dimensions. This section reviews key behavioural and marketing theories that explain why and how consumers respond to sustainable offerings and what drives their willingness to pay a higher price.

### 3.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) proposes that behaviour is driven by three primary determinants: **attitude**, **subjective norms**, and **perceived behavioural control**. This theory is widely used in green consumer behaviour research.

**Attitude:** Consumers who believe sustainable products are beneficial, ethical, or environmentally friendly develop favorable attitudes, increasing WTPP (Nguyen et al., 2020).

**Subjective norms:** Social pressure from peers, family, and society-especially relevant in collectivist cultures like India-can increase green purchasing intentions (Chan & Lau, 2002).

**Perceived behavioural control:** If consumers feel capable of purchasing sustainable products (affordable, accessible, trustworthy), they are more likely to pay a premium.

TPB suggests that sustainable marketing practices (e.g., transparent labeling, eco-certifications) positively shape attitudes and perceived control, thereby increasing WTPP.

### 3.2 Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory

VBN theory (Stern, 2000) states that pro-environmental behaviour arises from a chain of psychological processes:

**Values** (altruistic, biospheric, collectivist)

**Environmental beliefs**

**Personal norms** (sense of moral obligation)

Consumers who internalize environmental values and norms are more likely to choose eco- friendly products even at a premium. Research shows that consumers who feel a moral responsibility to protect the environment show higher WTPP for sustainable goods (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002).

In India, rising environmental crises (pollution, water scarcity) are strengthening personal environmental norms, particularly among youth (EY India, 2022), thereby increasing the role of VBN pathways in determining sustainable consumption.

### 3.3 Signaling Theory

Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) explains how companies use observable signals-such as eco- labels, sustainability certifications, recycled packaging, and CSR initiatives-to communicate unobservable qualities like environmental responsibility and ethical sourcing.

For consumers:

- Sustainable marketing practices function as **credible signals** of product quality and brand responsibility.
- Third-party certifications (e.g., FSC, Fairtrade, Organic India) enhance trust and reduce information asymmetry (Delmas & Grant, 2014).
- Strong sustainability signals allow brands to justify **premium pricing** and differentiate themselves from competitors.

Signaling is crucial in the Indian market, where skepticism toward green claims and greenwashing concerns are rising (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

### 3.4 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals define themselves through group memberships and seek products that reinforce identity and social standing.

Sustainable consumption is increasingly used as a form of **identity expression**, especially among urban and educated consumers (Haws et al., 2014). Buying eco-friendly products allows consumers to signal:

- Modernity
- Responsibility
- Social consciousness
- Higher ethical standards

In India's aspirational consumption culture, sustainable products can become symbolic goods that justify paying a premium (Niinimäki, 2020).

### 3.5 Price-Quality Inference Theory

Consumers often infer product quality from price levels; higher prices are perceived to indicate superior quality (Rao & Monroe, 1989). Sustainable products-often positioned as premium- may be perceived as:

- safer
- healthier
- better engineered
- ethically superior

Research shows that consumers perceive eco-friendly products as more durable and safer, strengthening their justifications for premium payments (Del Río et al., 2005). This theory supports the idea that sustainable marketing practices enhance perceived quality, which increases WTPP.

### 3.6 Linking Theories to Sustainable Marketing and WTPP

The reviewed theories collectively explain how sustainable marketing practices shape WTPP:

**TPB** → sustainable marketing improves attitudes, social norms, and perceived control, increasing premium willingness.

**VBN** → values and moral norms create internal motivations for paying extra for the environment.

**Signaling Theory** → eco-labels, green ads, and certifications act as signals that justify premium pricing.

**Social Identity Theory** → sustainable products enable identity expression and social approval, strengthening premium willingness.

**Price-Quality Inference Theory** → consumers associate sustainability with quality, which increases perceived value.

These theories form the foundation for the conceptual framework developed later in the paper, showing how sustainable marketing practices influence perceived value, trust, environmental concern, and ultimately consumer WTPP.

## 4. Sustainable Marketing Practices: A Conceptual Analysis

Sustainable marketing practices are multidimensional and involve integrating environmental and social responsibility into various stages of value creation. This section provides a conceptual analysis of key sustainable marketing practices used by firms globally and in India, and explains how each influences consumer perceptions and willingness to pay a premium (WTPP).

### 4.1 Role of Digital and Social Media in Sustainability Marketing

Digital platforms allow consumers to access sustainability information, review brand practices, and hold firms accountable. Social media influencers and online communities amplify sustainability values and shape eco-friendly norms (Schmuck et al., 2018).



For Indian consumers-heavily active on Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp-digital communication plays a critical role in:

- shaping perceptions of green brands

- educating about eco-friendly choices
- exposing greenwashing
- generating peer-driven social proof

Digital storytelling around sustainability can strengthen emotional engagement, encouraging consumers to pay a premium.

#### **4.2 Influence of Sustainable Marketing Practices on WTPP**

Across literature, sustainable marketing practices influence consumer willingness to pay a premium by:

- Enhancing perceived environmental and functional value
- Increasing trust via credible signals
- Activating personal norms and environmental beliefs
- Aligning with consumer identity and social expectations
- Reducing perceived risk associated with green products

In India, these practices must be adapted to diverse segments, with particular emphasis on affordability, transparency, and authentic communication.

### **5. Conceptual Framework**

Building upon the theoretical foundations and literature reviewed, this section develops an integrated conceptual model explaining how sustainable marketing practices influence consumer willingness to pay a premium (WTPP) in the Indian context. The model synthesizes insights from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Stern, 2000), Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), and research on perceived value, trust, and environmental concern.

#### **5.1 Proposed Conceptual Relationships**

Based on literature and theory, the following relationships form the core of the conceptual model:

##### **H1: Sustainable marketing practices positively influence perceived value.**

Sustainable features such as eco-friendly materials, recyclable packaging, and ethical sourcing enhance functional and emotional value (Pujari, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2020).

##### **H2: Sustainable marketing practices positively influence perceived quality.**

Consumers perceive sustainable goods as safer, healthier, and higher quality due to natural ingredients and eco-conscious production (Del Río et al., 2005).

##### **H3: Sustainable marketing practices positively influence brand trust.**

Authentic sustainability communication, eco-labels, and CSR initiatives act as credible signals, increasing trust (Delmas & Grant, 2014; Chen, 2010).

##### **H4: Perceived value positively influences willingness to pay a premium.**

Consumers pay more when they perceive meaningful functional or environmental value (Zeithaml, 1988; Nguyen et al., 2020).

##### **H5: Perceived quality positively influences willingness to pay a premium.**

Higher perceived quality justifies higher prices (Rao & Monroe, 1989).

##### **H6: Brand trust positively influences willingness to pay a premium.**

Trust reduces perceived risk and increases consumers' readiness to pay extra for sustainability claims (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

##### **H7: Environmental concern moderates the relationship between sustainable marketing practices and WTPP.**

Consumers with high environmental concern respond more positively to sustainable marketing and show

higher premium willingness (Stern, 2000; Laroche et al., 2001).

### 5.2 Integrated Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model proposes that:

**Sustainable marketing practices** enhance **perceived value**, **perceived quality**, and **brand trust**, which are mediating variables.

These mediators, in turn, increase **willingness to pay a premium (WTPP)**.

**Environmental concern** strengthens the effect of sustainable marketing practices on WTPP, functioning as a moderator.

The model incorporates **psychological**, **behavioural**, and **market-driven** factors to explain consumer decision-making in a sustainability context.

This integrated framework reflects the multidimensional nature of green consumption and acknowledges both rational (value, quality) and emotional/moral (trust, environmental concern) components.

#### Conceptual Framework Diagram



### 6. Conclusion

This conceptual and theoretical study examined how sustainable marketing practices influence consumer willingness to pay a premium (WTPP) in India. Drawing on extensive secondary literature and integrating insights from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Stern, 2000), Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), Social Identity Theory, and Price-Quality Inference Theory, the paper developed a holistic framework explaining the psychological, social, and cognitive mechanisms underpinning premium willingness for sustainable products.

### 6.1 Contributions to Theory and Practice Theoretical Contributions

1. The paper integrates multiple behavioural theories to explain premium willingness, offering a comprehensive conceptual model suitable for emerging markets.
2. It contextualizes global sustainability principles within the unique Indian socio-economic environment, addressing a gap in cross-cultural green marketing literature.
3. It clarifies the mediating roles of value, quality, and trust, and highlights environmental concern as a boundary condition.

### Practical Contributions

1. The framework provides marketers with a clear understanding of how sustainability investments translate into consumer value and premium acceptance.
2. It highlights the importance of credibility, eco-labeling, and transparent reporting for building trust in India's green market.
3. It offers insights for segmentation strategies-especially targeting environmentally concerned, urban, and young consumers.
4. It guides policy makers on the need for standardized eco-labels, stronger green marketing regulations, and environmental education initiatives.

### 3.1 Limitations of This Conceptual Study

Although rigorous and grounded in extensive secondary research, the study has inherent limitations:

1. **Absence of empirical data:** Without primary or secondary numerical datasets, theoretical linkages cannot be statistically tested.
2. **Dynamic consumer behaviour:** Sustainability preferences evolve rapidly, especially due to social media and global trends; insights may require periodic updating.
3. **Industry-specific differences:** The conceptual model is broad and may not fully reflect variations in WTPP across categories such as food, fashion, electronics, or automobiles.
4. **Lack of behavioural validation:** The intention-behaviour gap-particularly strong in sustainability contexts-cannot be measured without empirical evidence.

Despite these limitations, the conceptual framework provides a robust foundation for future empirical research.

### 3.2 Directions for Future Research

Based on identified gaps, future studies should:

1. **Conduct primary data surveys** to empirically validate the conceptual pathways and mediating/moderating effects proposed.
2. **Use experimental or quasi-experimental designs** to measure actual willingness to pay rather than self-reported intentions.
3. **Explore Indian sub-segments**, such as rural consumers, Gen-Z, working professionals, and eco-conscious high-income groups.
4. **Compare product categories**, as WTPP may be higher for food and personal care but lower for mass-market FMCG.
5. **Investigate digital sustainability communication**, including influencer credibility, AI-driven green advertising, and consumer responses to sustainability content.
6. **Integrate cultural and psychological variables**, such as materialism, spirituality, and ethical identity, known to influence green behaviours in India.
7. **Examine B2B perspectives**, including how sustainable procurement practices influence

organizational buying decisions.

Such research will help refine the conceptual model, enhance predictive validity, and inform evidence-based sustainable marketing strategies.

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