

The Paradox of Conscious Consumption: Why Sustainability Awareness Does Not Reduce Fast Fashion Purchases?

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Abstract

The worldwide fashion industry finds itself dealing with a crucial dilemma: fast fashion consumption is still rising even as consumers become more conscious of sustainability issues. This study looks into the underlying causes of the lack of a significant decrease in fast fashion shopping behavior when sustainability awareness is raised. The research identifies important psychological, social, and economic factors sustaining fast fashion demand by drawing on a thorough analysis of scientific and theoretically grounded literature, including empirical studies based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), cognitive dissonance theory, and social identity frameworks.

Although consumers show high levels of environmental concern, variables like low pricing, social influence, impulsive purchase behavior, as well as perceived behavioral control hinder sustainable consumption behaviors, according to a qualitative synthesis of secondary evidence from several academic sources. The results demonstrate a persistent attitude-behavior gap in which customers justify unsustainable purchases even when they are aware of the negative effects on the environment.

The study comes to the conclusion that changing consumption patterns requires more than just raising awareness of sustainability. To close this gap, structural interventions are needed, such as behavioral incentives, better access to alternatives that are environmentally friendly and nudging tactics. The study adds to the body of knowledge on consumer behavior by providing an integrated framework that clarifies the dilemma and offers useful information for marketers and legislators who want to encourage the adoption of sustainable fashion.

Keywords: Sustainable Consumption, Fast Fashion, Consumer Behavior, Sustainability Awareness.

1. Introduction

Driven by rapid production cycles, trend repetition, and the increasing accessibility of fashion, the fast fashion industry's global rise is a defining characteristic of modern consumer culture. By releasing new collections at previously unheard-of speeds and prices, companies like Zara, H&M, and Shein have completely changed the fashion industry. Although this strategy has made fashionable clothing widely

accessible, it has also greatly exacerbated social issues and environmental deterioration. Due of excessive water use, textile waste, and carbon emissions, the sector is increasingly acknowledged as one of the worst causes of pollution worldwide. As a result, the idea of fast fashion is becoming more closely linked to ethical and ecological issues in addition to economic efficiency.

Fast fashion has a variety of negative effects on the environment. The fabrication of synthetic fibers, artificial dyeing, and mass-scale transportation are only a few of the resource-intensive operations that are crucial to the production of inexpensive clothing. Because of the short product lifecycles, these activities contribute to landfill overflow, greenhouse gas emissions, and water contamination. The rate of clothes disposal keeps rising despite a growing global conversation about sustainability and responsible consumption, suggesting a continuous disconnect between consumer behavior and environmental consciousness. This paradox is especially noticeable in emerging economies and among younger customers, who frequently engage in fast fashion purchasing while also displaying a high standard of sustainability conscience.

“There is a growing awareness among consumers about the unsustainable practices of the fast fashion industry...yet demand remains high,” as Kang and Badal, (2025), explains. The attitude-behavior gap, a more profound behavioral inconsistency, is reflected in this paradox. Consumers are becoming more aware of the negative social and environmental effects of the fashion business, according to recent scholarly discussions. Social media activism, documentaries, and awareness campaigns have increased public awareness of problems like waste production, worker exploitation, and environmental damage. Nevertheless, the consumption of fast fashion has not decreased proportionately as a result of this increased knowledge. Instead, customers frequently still place a higher value on immediacy, variety, and price than on sustainability. This occurrence is a reflection of a larger behavioral paradox known as the attitude-behavior gap, which occurs when people's stated values do not match their actual purchase decisions.

Since psychological elements like emotions, impulsive purchasing, FOMO, and identity requirements frequently take priority over ethical intentions, the continued existence of the attitude-behavior gap suggests that standard rational models are unable to explain why sustainability awareness does not result in responsible consumption. Fast fashion purchases are also encouraged by societal pressures, particularly peer pressure and social media among younger consumers. Ethical choices are further limited by structural obstacles including the high cost of sustainable alternatives, their scarcity, and greenwashing. In order to better explain the paradox of conscious consumption, this study employs a multidimensional method to fill a significant research gap.

Research Objectives

- The first goal is to investigate the paradox between sustainability awareness and ongoing fast fashion consumption, with an emphasis on why consumers who are conscious of ethical and environmental issues yet make frequent purchases.
- The second objective is to examine psychological elements (like emotions and impulsive purchases), social effects (like peer pressure and social media), and structural obstacles (like the price and availability of sustainable alternatives), the second goal is to pinpoint the main causes of the attitude-behavior gap.
- The third objective is to provide a comprehensive knowledge of how sustainability awareness converts—or fails to incorporate into actual consumer behavior, the third goal is to create a unified

theoretical framework that integrates psychological, social, and structural elements to explain this contradiction.

2. Background of the Study

A significant contribution to urgent environmental issues, such as excessive carbon emissions, excessive water use, and the production of substantial amounts of textile waste, is the worldwide fashion business. Clothing manufacture involves resource-intensive and environmentally harmful production procedures, including textile cultivation, dyeing, finishing, and shipping. These effects have been exacerbated in particular by the growth of fast fashion, which has accelerated cycles of production and consumption. Fast fashion companies encourage customers to buy frequently and discard clothing rapidly by consistently introducing new trends at low rates. The fashion business is among the least sustainable in the world because of this disposable mentality, which not only raises landfill waste but also worsens pollution and resource depletion.

Simultaneously, consumers' awareness of sustainability has increased dramatically due to increasing media attention, regulatory initiatives, and scholarly studies emphasizing the ethical and environmental implications of fashion consumption. Consumer education on topics like trash production, worker exploitation, and climate change has been greatly aided by documentaries, social media campaigns, and influencer campaigning. This increased knowledge is especially noticeable among younger consumers, notably Generation Z, who frequently voice significant concerns about ethical behavior and environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, consumer behavior has not changed in line with this increased awareness. Many people nonetheless buy quick fashion on a regular basis, which highlights a gap between their knowledge and behavior and perpetuates the paradox of conscious consumption.

Table 1: Fast Fashion vs Sustainable Consumption Dynamics

Dimension	Fast Fashion	Sustainable Fashion
Price	Low	High
Production Speed	Rapid	Slow
Consumer Appeal	Trend-driven	Value-driven
Environmental Impact	High	Low
Consumer Adoption	High	Moderate

This paradox serves as the basis for the “conscious consumption paradox.”

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Attitude-Behavior Gap

The attitude-behavior divide is confirmed by a large amount of research, especially when it comes to sustainable consumption. Several studies show that although customers have positive sentiments toward sustainability and strong pro-environmental ideals, these intentions frequently do not convert into actual purchase behavior. This discrepancy is particularly evident in the fashion industry, as customers who say they support ethical and environmentally friendly business methods yet interact with rapid fashion companies. This contradiction implies that awareness by itself is insufficient to influence conduct. Additional research reveals that customers prefer to conceal or override their sustainable goals when they are faced with attractive fast fashion products, which are defined by low pricing, trendy styles, and

immediate availability. Decision-making consequently becomes situational rather than value-driven, which perpetuates the discrepancy between consumers' beliefs and their actions (Haines Shelley, 2017).

3.2.Cognitive Dissonance and Rationalization

The cognitive dissonance theory offers a crucial insight for why consumers persist in unsustainable consumption even when they are aware of the detrimental effects. When people have contradictory ideas and behaviors—in this case, appreciating sustainability while buying fast fashion items—they experience cognitive dissonance. Customers use a variety of rationalization techniques to ease tension by defending their actions and lowering emotions of guilt. Beliefs like "it's cheap, so it's acceptable," "one purchase won't make a difference," and "brands are responsible, not consumers" are common defenses. These justifications enable people to continue unsustainable behaviors while maintaining a positive self-image. Empirical research also shows that customers use these mental methods to intentionally counteract the guilt associated with overconsumption, normalizing recurring purchases and reducing the influence of environmental awareness on real decisions (Rosely Nurhidayah, et al., 2023).

3.3.Social Influence and Identity

Social influence plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior, often overriding individual attitudes toward sustainability. In contemporary fashion consumption, purchasing decisions are deeply embedded within social contexts, where the need for belonging, acceptance, and identity expression becomes central. The fear of missing out (FOMO) and the desire for social validation drive consumers to stay aligned with rapidly changing fashion trends. Social media platforms amplify this effect by continuously exposing individuals to curated lifestyles, influencer endorsements, and peer comparisons. As a result, consumers—particularly younger demographics—associate fashion choices with personal identity and social status. Research indicates that these social pressures frequently outweigh sustainability concerns, leading individuals to prioritize appearance, trendiness, and peer approval over ethical considerations. Consequently, consumption behavior becomes a means of social signaling rather than a reflection of personal values (Sallaku Karolina, et al., 2025).

3.4.Role of Price and Accessibility

Sustainable consumption is significantly hampered by structural and economic issues, especially price sensitivity and accessibility. Price-conscious shoppers find sustainable fashion products less appealing because they are sometimes thought to be more costly than quick fashion alternatives. Their accessibility is further diminished by their narrow distribution methods, low availability, and lack of variety. Fast fashion companies, on the other hand, provide reasonably priced, stylish, and easily accessible goods, making them a more practical option for customers. Research regularly shows that when faced with financial limitations or few options, even people with great sustainable goals may give up on ethical issues. Furthermore, consumers are further deterred from making sustainable purchases by problems like supply chain opaqueness and greenwashing techniques. These results demonstrate that market structures and economic realities have a significant impact on consumer choices, which are not chosen in a vacuum (Olamide Abdulquadari Abdulazeez, 2025).

3.5.Theory of Planned Behavior

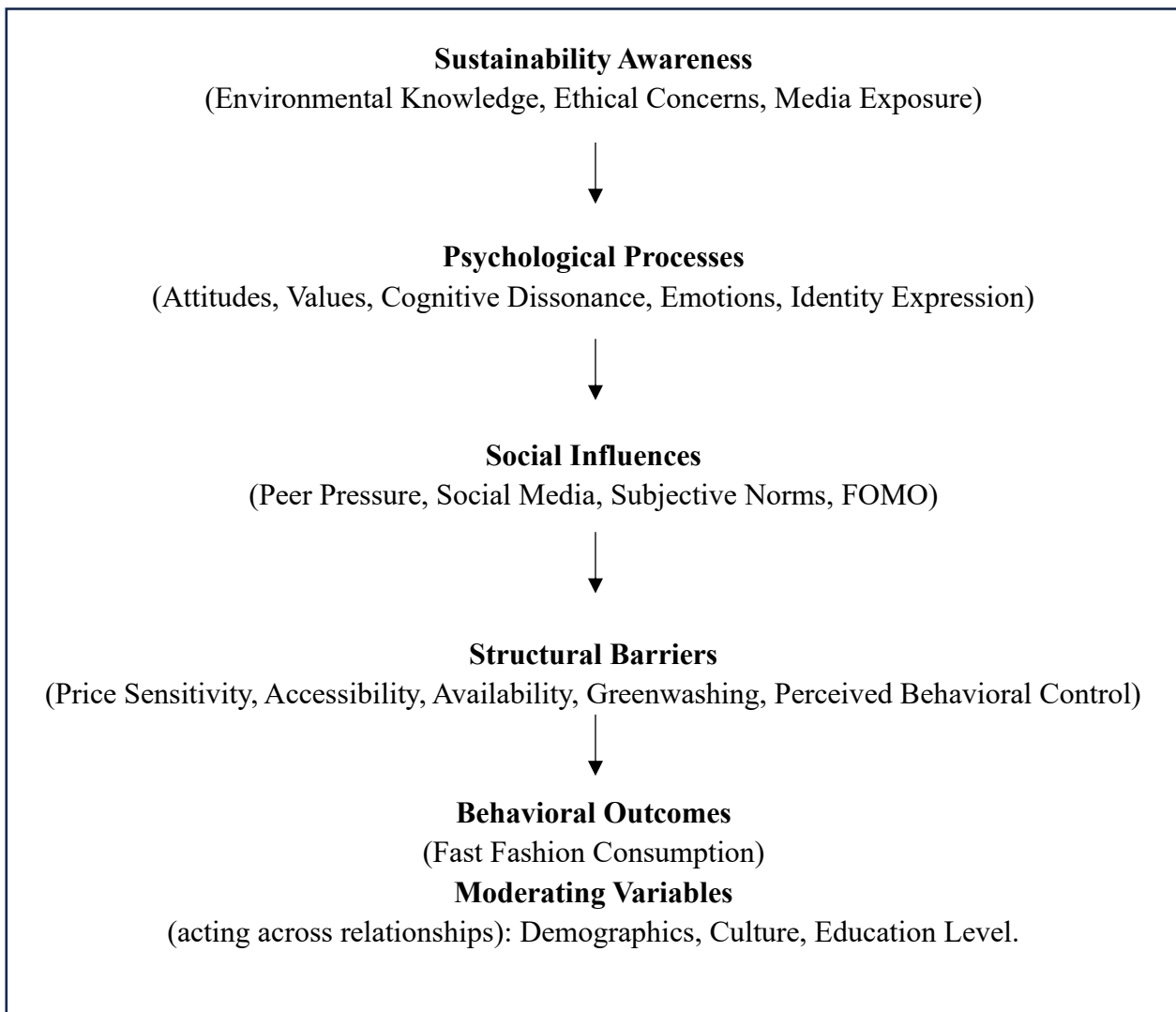
A popular framework for comprehending the connection between beliefs, intentions, and conduct is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Three main elements, according to TPB, influence consumer behavior: attitudes toward the conduct, perceived behavioral authority (the ease or difficulty of completing the habit), and subjective norms (social pressure). In the domain of sustainable fashion, consumers' behavior is greatly impacted by perceived behavioral control, even when they may have favorable

sentiments and encounter social promotion toward ethical buying. This covers elements including cost, accessibility, and practicality. According to research, low perceived control—caused by structural or financial limitations—can keep consumers from acting ecologically even in situations where awareness and intentions are strong. Therefore, Theory of Planned Behavior emphasizes the significance of enabling environments in bridging the gap between intention and action, helping to explain why awareness alone does not ensure behavioral change (Magwegwe Frank M., et al., 2024).

4. Conceptual Framework

By recognizing that there are individual differences in the relationship between consumer behavior and environmental consciousness, moderators enrich the framework. Rather, how consumers interpret information, react to social influences, and get beyond structural obstacles is influenced by elements including demography, cultural background, and personal connection with fashion. This multifaceted approach increases the model's explanatory power and offers an increased awareness of the attitude–behavior gap in fast fashion consumption.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



5. Methodology

In order to investigate the conflict between sustainability consciousness and ongoing rapid fashion consumption, this study uses a **qualitative research design**. An in-depth understanding of customer perceptions, motivations, and behavioral conflicts that cannot be sufficiently represented by merely quantitative metrics is made possible by a qualitative approach.

5.1. Research Design

Understanding the subjective meanings and sensations connected to conscious consumption is the main goal of this **interpretivist paradigm-based research**. Finding underlying psychological, social, and contextual elements that account for the attitude-behavior gap is the goal of this exploratory study. To find recurrent themes and constructions in the chosen literature and qualitative data, a **thematic analysis** approach was used.

5.2. Data Collection Method

The secondary qualitative data used in the study came from:

- Journal publications that have undergone peer review.
- Dissertations and theses in academia.
- Research papers that are conceptual and empirical.
- Industry reports about sustainability and rapid fashion.

These sources were carefully chosen because they were pertinent to:

- Awareness of sustainability.
- Fashion-related consumer behavior.
- Social and psychological factors that affect consumer choices.

This method guarantees a thorough and multifaceted comprehension of the phenomenon.

5.3. Sampling and Data Analysis

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to choose pertinent literature about consumer behavior, awareness, and rapid fashion consumption. Studies that dealt with sustainable attitudes and psychological, social, or economic factors were included; those that were unrelated or solely technical were not.

To find important patterns and connect them to theories like the Theory of Planned Behavior, Cognitive Dissonance, and Social Identity Theory, thematic analysis and interpretative synthesis were used. This method demonstrated why sustainability awareness did not result in actual behavior, which helped explain the attitude-behavior gap.

Table 2: Trustworthiness and Rigor

Criterion	Application in Study
Credibility	Triangulation of multiple academic sources
Dependability	Transparent methodology and selection criteria
Confirmability	Theory-driven interpretation
Transferability	Applicability to broader consumer segments

5.4. Justification for Qualitative Approach

The paradox of conscious consumption involves complicated human behavior influenced by societal conventions, emotions, and environmental limitations. Therefore, a qualitative approach is best as it:

- Investigates the underlying causes of customer choices.

- Explains why attitudes and behaviors are inconsistent.
- Incorporates a variety of theoretical viewpoints.

6. Results & Discussions

6.1. Awareness is Necessary but not Sufficient

The persistence of the attitude-behavior gap is shown by the fact that although consumers are aware of the sustainability challenges associated with fast fashion, this awareness does not result in behavioral change.

6.2. Emotional and Social Drivers Dominate

The impact of knowledge is diminished since fashion decisions are influenced less by logical sustainability concerns and more by feelings, identity, and social pressures like FOMO.

6.3. Structural Barriers Persist

Sustainable choices are less accessible due to high pricing, limited availability, and lack of transparency, which deters customers from following through on their goals.

6.4. Role of Perceived Behavioral Control

The Theory of Planned Behavior states that while having favorable attitudes, customers frequently believe they lack the information or skills necessary to make sustainable decisions.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Fast Fashion Consumption

Factor	Impact	Evidence
Price Sensitivity	High	Olamide, A. A., (2025)
Social Influence	High	Sallaku Karolina, et al., (2025)
Impulse Buying	High	Rosely Nurhidayah, et.al., (2023)
Awareness	Moderate	Magwegwe, F. M., (2024)

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that there is a glaring discrepancy between customers' actual purchase behavior and their knowledge about sustainability. Customers continue to purchase fast fashion even when they are conscious of ethical and environmental issues. This demonstrates that there is a "conscious consumption paradox." The results imply that awareness by itself is insufficient to influence behavior. Instead, the following factors have a greater influence on customer decisions:

Psychological elements like the need for novelty, quick reward, and identity expression Social influences include social media approbation, trends, and peer pressure.

Structural limitations such as accessibility, price, and the availability of sustainable substitutes

The study provides a thorough framework to better explain why sustainable intentions do not transition into real conduct by combining many theoretical viewpoints (such as consumer behavior theory, social impact theory, and perceived behavioral control). Because of this, the study is useful for scholars and professionals who want to encourage sustainable consumption.

8. Future Research Recommendations

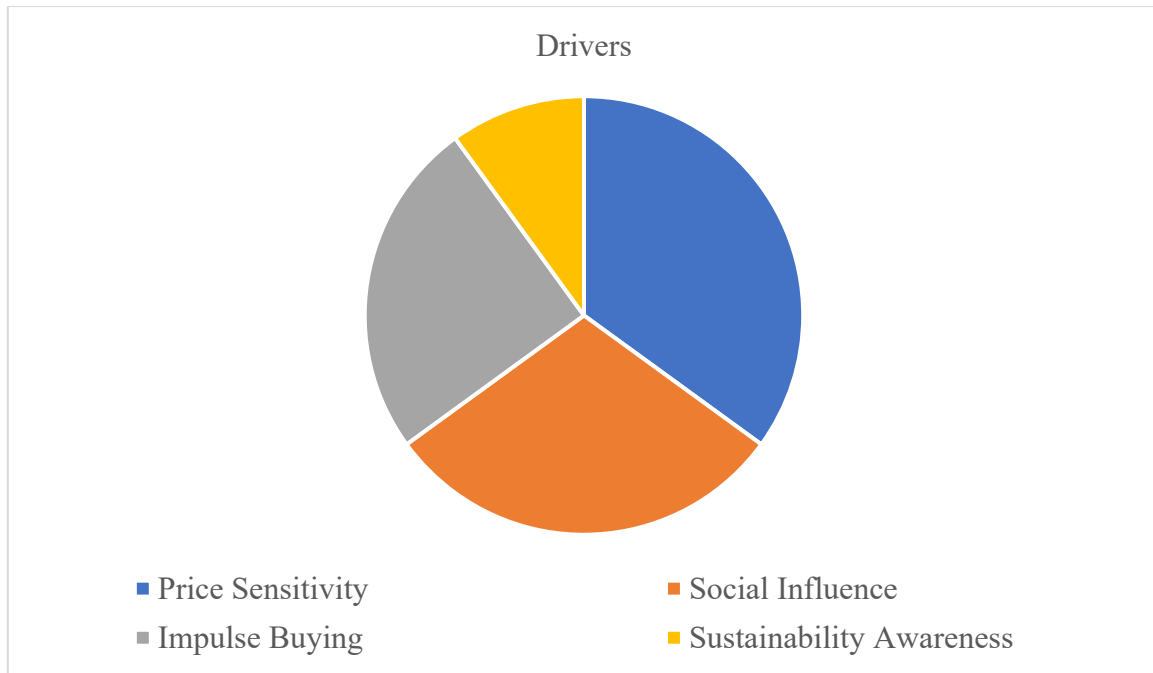
Future research can investigate the following avenues to expand on the present findings:

- Experimental research on behavioral nudges: To observe how consumer behavior can be changed in real time, researchers can try interventions like pricing methods, eco-labels, or default sustainable solutions.

- Cross-cultural comparisons: A fuller understanding of local versus global purchasing patterns can be gained by looking at how consumers from various cultural backgrounds react to sustainability.
- Longitudinal analysis: Examining consumer behavior over time can reveal if sustainability awareness eventually causes behavioral change or whether the paradox endures over time.

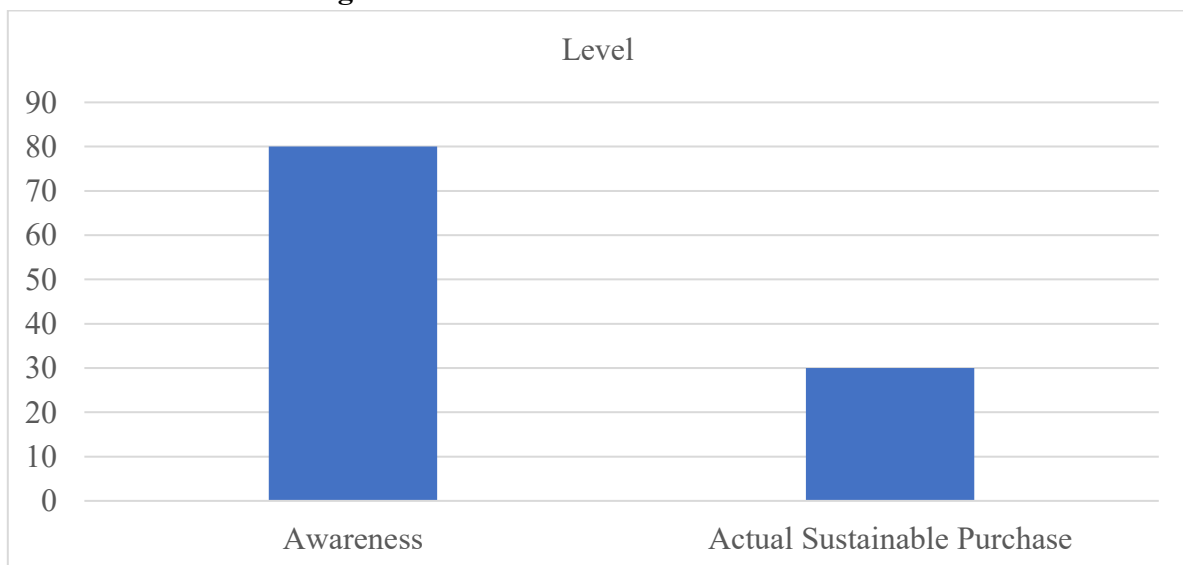
9. Appendix

Figure 2: Key Drivers of Fast Fashion Consumption



Price sensitivity (35%) and social influence (30%) are the most important elements driving fast fashion consumption, followed by impulsive purchasing behavior (25%). The attitude–behavior gap is further supported by the fact that sustainability awareness (10%) has least impact on actual buying decisions.

Figure 3: Awareness vs Purchase Behavior



The graph clearly illustrates the disparity between actual sustainable purchasing (30%) and sustainability awareness (80%). There is a significant attitude–behavior gap because, despite great awareness, very few customers take action. This implies that sustainable purchase choices are constrained by elements including cost, practicality, and social influence.

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