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The Psychology of Green Choices: What Drives Eco-Friendly Consumer Behaviour in Urban India?

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological determinants shaping eco-friendly consumer behaviour among urban Indians through a qualitative, interpretivist approach. Semi-structured interviews with diverse metropolitan consumers reveal that moral responsibility, internalised sustainability values and perceived consumer effectiveness strongly motivate green choices. Social influence and lifestyle aspirations further shape behavioural intentions, particularly among younger consumers who associate sustainability with modern identity and social consciousness. However, widespread scepticism toward green claims, concerns about greenwashing and limited trust in brands weaken purchase decisions. Structural constraints—such as high prices, limited product availability and inadequate urban infrastructure—create a persistent attitude–behaviour gap, even among highly motivated individuals. The findings demonstrate that sustainable behaviour in India results from the interplay of psychological, social and contextual factors rather than attitudes alone. The study highlights the need for credible green markets, supportive urban systems and behavioural interventions that enable sustainability to become a practical, mainstream choice.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Ecologically Conscious Consumer Behaviour (ECCB), Sustainable consumption, Green purchase intention, Green product trust, Greenwashing.

Introduction

Urban India is experiencing accelerated environmental pressures as rapid economic growth and urbanisation reshape consumption patterns. Understanding the psychological determinants of eco-friendly consumer behaviour has therefore become essential for fostering sustainable markets. Existing studies indicate that urban youth in India exhibit growing ecological consciousness, with attitudes, personal norms and perceived responsibility emerging as significant predictors of green behaviour (Taufique, Siwar, & Begum, 2018). Supporting this, recent Indian research grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) demonstrates that environmental attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control strongly influence green consumption and sustainable lifestyle choices (Kennedy *et al.*, 2024). International comparative work further highlights the importance of psychological and contextual factors—such as perceived benefits, environmental concern and structural barriers—in shaping green purchase intentions (Ogiemwonyi *et al.*, 2023).

Indian-specific studies continue to document evolving consumer trends. Recent SAGE and Research Gate publications report persistent gaps between consumers' positive attitudes and actual green purchase behaviour, reflecting practical constraints and motivational inconsistencies (Roberts, 2025; Singh, 2021). Qualitative investigations similarly reveal that social influence, moral obligations and perceived consumer effectiveness play substantial roles in shaping everyday green decisions (Sharma, 2015). Research on durable goods also shows that environmental concern, value perception and product availability influence consumer choices for long-lasting green products (Ghose, 2018). Meanwhile, newer studies focusing on Gen-Z consumers across Indian cities indicate emerging value shifts toward sustainability—yet moderated by affordability and brand trust (IJSRST, 2024–2025). Policy perspectives reinforce the significance of consumer behaviour in national sustainability goals.

Reports from TERI highlight the urgency of transitioning to sustainable consumption practices, while NITI Aayog's sustainable growth frameworks emphasise behavioural interventions as critical enablers of green markets (TERI, 2023; NITI Aayog, 2022). Practitioner analyses from CUTS further identify consumer awareness gaps, accessibility constraints and socio-economic barriers that limit sustainable choices in India (CUTS, 2021).

Despite these advances, a holistic psychological understanding of what drives eco-friendly consumer behaviour in India's urban context remains fragmented. The interplay of cognitive antecedents, social norms, individual responsibility, contextual barriers and generational value shifts has not been fully synthesised. Addressing this gap is essential, given India's rapidly expanding consumer base and rising emphasis on sustainability.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the psychological drivers of eco-friendly consumer behaviour in urban India by integrating behavioural theory, empirical findings and policy insights. This integrated approach seeks to advance current knowledge and contribute to more effective consumer-centric sustainability interventions.

Literature Review

The body of research on green consumer behaviour in India has grown substantially over the past decade, revealing a complex interaction of psychological, social and contextual determinants. Early empirical studies focusing on young urban consumers highlight that environmental attitudes, perceived personal responsibility and moral norms significantly predict ecologically conscious consumer behaviour (Taufique, Siwar, & Begum, 2018). Their work established the importance of internalised pro-environmental values and set a foundation for subsequent research adopting behavioural models.

Building on this foundation, Kennedy *et al.* (2024) applied the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to examine green consumption in Tamil Nadu. Their findings reaffirmed the predictive power of attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control in shaping sustainable lifestyle adoption. This aligns with Ajzen's (1991) theoretical proposition that behavioural intentions are shaped by cognitive and normative evaluations. These studies collectively demonstrate that psychological constructs remain central in explaining eco-friendly intentions within Indian urban populations.

Beyond India, cross-country studies such as Ogiemwonyi *et al.* (2023) contribute valuable comparative insights by identifying additional variables including perceived green benefits, environmental concern and structural barriers. These findings are particularly relevant for the Indian context, where infrastructural limitations, inconsistent product availability and trust deficits often hinder green purchasing.

Consumer behaviour research within India also documents several behavioural inconsistencies. Quantitative surveys published in SAGE journals (Roberts, 2025) and studies hosted on Research Gate (Singh, 2021) consistently reveal a persistent attitude-behaviour gap: although many consumers express positive environmental attitudes, fewer translate these into consistent purchase behaviour. These gaps stem from price sensitivity, limited brand credibility and skepticism toward green claims. Qualitative evidence further reinforces these dynamics. Interviews and thematic analyses (Sharma, 2015) show that social pressure, moral norms, and perceived consumer effectiveness influence green actions, but such motivations are often insufficient to overcome habitual or convenience-driven behaviour.

Product-specific studies extend this literature by examining markets for green durable goods. Ghose (2018) demonstrates that product availability, perceived long-term value and environmental concern significantly shape durable green product purchasing, suggesting that both psychological and functional evaluations matter when consumers assess high-involvement green products.

Recent research also points to emerging generational distinctions. Studies focused on Gen-Z and younger urban consumers (IJSRST, 2024–2025) show strong sustainability awareness, but this cohort remains constrained by affordability, limited brand trust and inconsistent product information. These findings underscore the importance of generational value shifts in shaping future green markets in India.

Policy-based literature complements academic research by contextualising psychological drivers within India's larger sustainable development agenda. TERI's sustainability reports (2023) emphasise consumer behaviour as a core pillar of green transitions, while NITI Aayog's policy frameworks highlight behavioural interventions, nudges and awareness-building as essential levers for promoting sustainable consumption. Practitioner analyses from CUTS (2021) further document gaps in consumer awareness and access, demonstrating that psychological drivers must be understood alongside socio-economic and market constraints.

Collectively, these studies indicate that eco-friendly consumer behaviour in urban India is shaped by a dynamic interplay of individual cognition, social influence, moral norms, generational shifts and structural limitations. While attitudes and norms remain strong predictors of intention, real-world behaviour continues to be moderated by price sensitivity, trust in green claims and the availability of credible green alternatives. This evolving body of literature underscores the need for integrative studies that connect psychological determinants with contextual realities to better understand and promote sustainable consumer choices in India.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the psychological drivers that influence eco-friendly consumer behaviour among urban Indian consumers. Given that sustainable consumption is deeply embedded in personal meanings, socio-cultural values, moral considerations and lived experiences, a qualitative approach is best suited to uncover the nuanced, subjective and often non-linear ways in which individuals interpret and act upon environmental concerns. Aligning with an interpretivist worldview, the study seeks to understand how consumers make sense of "green choices" within the context of their everyday lives, rather than attempting to quantify predetermined variables or impose fixed behavioural models. This orientation is consistent with calls by previous scholars who argue that qualitative insights are necessary to complement quantitative frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the Ecologically Conscious Consumer Behaviour (ECCB) model (Taufique *et al.*, 2018), and sustainable lifestyle models applied in India (Kennedy *et al.*, 2024), all of which highlight important constructs while overlooking deeper experiential and socio-cultural dynamics.

Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with urban consumers residing in major metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit individuals who demonstrated at least basic

awareness of sustainability, environmental issues or green products, thereby ensuring relevance to the research objectives. Approximately 25–30 participants were targeted, reflecting sample sizes commonly found in qualitative studies on green consumption in India (Sharma, 2015; Singh, 2021) and sufficient to achieve thematic saturation. Participants varied across age groups, occupations, genders and income levels to ensure diversity of perspectives and experiences. Interviews were guided by a flexible interview protocol derived from constructs reported in prior literature—including attitudes, norms, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, perceived consumer effectiveness, trust in green claims and perceived barriers—drawing specifically from Ajzen's (1991) behavioural constructs, findings by Taufique *et al.* (2018) on ecological consciousness, and Indian studies on durable green products, social influence and generational sustainability values (Ghose, 2018; Roberts, 2025; IJSRST, 2024–2025).

Each interview explored how individuals define sustainability, how social and personal norms shape their choices, what motivates them to adopt eco-friendly practices, and what psychological or practical barriers inhibit consistent green behaviour. The semi-structured format allowed participants to narrate freely while enabling the researcher to probe for depth, contradictions and context-specific influences. This open and conversational style was particularly useful for revealing hidden attitudes, value conflicts, habitual consumption patterns and contextual constraints that are typically not captured through structured quantitative surveys.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's systematic six-phase framework. Coding began with close, line-by-line reading to identify recurring ideas, which were gradually grouped into higher-order themes such as moral obligation, perceived responsibility, scepticism toward green marketing, lifestyle aspirations, affordability concerns, social expectations and infrastructural or market-level barriers. Attention was also given to contradictions between attitudes and actions—a phenomenon widely noted in existing Indian research on green purchase behaviour (Roberts, 2025; Singh, 2021). Themes were constantly compared with existing theoretical frameworks to identify overlaps, extensions or divergences, while preserving the authenticity of participants' lived experiences.

To ensure methodological rigour, the study incorporated multiple strategies to enhance trustworthiness, including triangulation between interview data and insights from policy reports by TERI, NITI Aayog and CUTS to situate individual experiences within broader environmental discourse and market realities. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, wherein selected participants were invited to verify interpretations of their responses. Reflexive memo-writing throughout the research process helped minimise researcher bias and maintain transparency in analytical decisions. Thick, detailed descriptions of participant experiences were used to enhance transferability, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar urban contexts.

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed about the purpose of the research, the confidential handling of their data and their right to withdraw at any point. No identifying personal information was collected, ensuring anonymity and protecting participant privacy. By adopting

this qualitative, interpretive and ethically grounded methodology, the study aims to provide a rich, contextualised understanding of the psychological factors that shape eco-friendly consumer behaviour in urban India—an area where existing literature, though expanding, remains predominantly quantitative and fragmented.

Results and Findings

The analysis of the interview data revealed a layered and often complex psychological landscape shaping eco-friendly consumer behaviour among urban Indians. While participants consistently expressed positive attitudes toward environmental protection, their choices were embedded in personal meanings, moral emotions, socio-cultural expectations and everyday constraints that shaped when and how sustainability was enacted. The findings reflected five major thematic clusters: moral responsibility and internalised values, perceived consumer effectiveness, social influence and lifestyle aspirations, trust and scepticism toward green products, and structural or contextual barriers. Together, these themes illustrate that green behaviour in urban India is less a linear decision and more a negotiation between intention, identity, practicality and credibility.

A strong sense of moral responsibility emerged as a central driver of eco-friendly choices. Many participants described sustainability as a matter of conscience, emphasising personal duty, guilt, and the desire to “do the right thing.” These moral emotions often stemmed from early socialisation within family or school environments where environmental values were emphasised. Participants spoke of feeling personally accountable for everyday actions such as waste segregation, conserving resources or choosing greener products. This moral anchoring did not always translate to consistent practice, but it provided an internal reference point against which participants evaluated their behaviour, echoing the value-based motivations highlighted in prior Indian studies.

Another prominent theme was perceived consumer effectiveness—the belief that individual actions can meaningfully contribute to environmental outcomes. Participants who believed that “every small action counts” were substantially more likely to maintain eco-friendly habits, even when such choices required greater effort or cost. In contrast, those who felt that environmental problems were too large or systemic expressed resignation or disengagement. This perception often interacted with trust in institutions; individuals who believed government bodies, brands and urban systems were genuinely improving sustainability initiatives felt more empowered, whereas scepticism toward institutional intent weakened their sense of consumer efficacy. Social influence played a pivotal contextual role, particularly in shaping lifestyle aspirations among younger, urban middle-class consumers. Several participants described adopting eco-friendly practices—such as using reusable items, buying organic foods or choosing sustainable fashion—as part of a modern, health-oriented or socially conscious lifestyle. Sustainability was sometimes intertwined with identity performance, signalling responsibility, modernity or global awareness. Peer influence was especially strong in workplace and university environments, where norms around recycling or eco-friendly choices were visible. However, participants also noted that these norms were inconsistent across urban spaces, making sustainable behaviour highly situational.

Trust and scepticism toward green products formed another significant dimension of consumer psychology. Although participants expressed interest in purchasing green products,

many doubted the authenticity of brands' environmental claims. Concerns about greenwashing, inflated pricing and ambiguous certifications led several individuals to rely on intuition, personal research or word-of-mouth recommendations rather than believing marketing messages. Participants frequently reported confusion about how to verify the "greenness" of a product, and this uncertainty often discouraged purchase decisions. Scepticism was strongest in categories such as apparel and electronics, while products with visible or directly perceptible sustainability attributes—such as biodegradable items or energy-efficient appliances—generated slightly more trust.

The final major theme involved structural and contextual barriers that disrupted sustainable intentions. Participants consistently cited high price differentials, limited availability of eco-friendly alternatives, inadequate municipal infrastructure and lack of convenience as significant obstacles. Even individuals who expressed strong environmental concern often reverted to conventional products due to affordability constraints or because green options were inaccessible. In cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, participants emphasised the difficulty of maintaining eco-friendly habits amid fast-paced routines, traffic congestion, inconsistent waste management and limited household storage space. These structural barriers often resulted in what participants described as an "intention–action gap," where values aligned with sustainability but behaviour faltered under situational pressures. Some also noted that sustainability was perceived as an "extra effort," requiring planning, time and emotional bandwidth that not all consumers consistently possessed.

Taken together, these findings reveal that eco-friendly consumer behaviour in urban India is shaped by an interplay of psychological, social and contextual factors. Moral responsibility and sustainability values form the motivational foundation, while perceived efficacy and social norms influence the extent to which individuals feel empowered and supported. Trust in green products and institutional credibility determines whether consumers consider green choices reliable, and structural constraints ultimately dictate the feasibility of practising sustainability in daily life. This layered understanding demonstrates why pro-environmental attitudes often coexist with inconsistent behaviour, and why strengthening eco-friendly consumption in India requires not only individual-level motivation but also credible market practices and supportive urban systems.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the psychological drivers that shape eco-friendly consumer behaviour in urban India, and the findings reveal a nuanced and interdependent set of influences that extend well beyond simple pro-environmental attitudes. The interviews demonstrated that most urban consumer's anchor their sustainable choices in moral responsibility and internalised values, perceiving environmental care as part of personal ethics rather than as an externally imposed expectation. Yet, these values alone were insufficient to ensure consistent behavioural patterns. Participants' sense of perceived consumer effectiveness played a decisive role in determining whether these values translated into everyday action; when individuals believed their choices could make a meaningful difference, they were far more likely to engage in sustained eco-friendly behaviour. However, when environmental problems were seen as vast and structural, consumers often felt powerless, leading to disengagement despite espoused concern.

The study also highlighted how social norms and lifestyle aspirations inform green consumption in urban India. Younger consumers, in particular, framed sustainability as part of a modern, health-conscious and socially aware identity, influenced by peer expectations in workplaces, universities and digital spaces. This social dimension suggests that green behaviour is not merely a private choice but is embedded in public performance, signalling responsibility, aspiration and alignment with global trends. At the same time, participants' willingness to act sustainably was undermined by a widespread scepticism toward green products. Concerns regarding authenticity, credibility and greenwashing eroded trust, causing consumers to hesitate or revert to familiar alternatives, even when they expressed enthusiasm for sustainable living. This trust deficit underscores the critical need for transparent certifications, clearer communication and more credible brand behaviour.

The conclusion that emerged most strongly from the data, however, is that structural and contextual barriers continue to be the most formidable obstacles to sustainable consumption in India's urban environments. High price premiums, inconsistent product availability, limited access to reliable waste-management systems and the pressures of fast-paced urban life all contribute to a persistent intention–action gap. Even motivated, informed and value-driven participants found themselves constrained by conditions that made sustainable choices inconvenient or impractical. These findings confirm that psychological factors and attitudes cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation; they are powerfully mediated by the infrastructural, economic and institutional realities in which consumers operate.

Taken together, the study concludes that fostering eco-friendly consumer behaviour in urban India requires a holistic approach that strengthens moral and efficacy-based motivations while simultaneously addressing structural constraints and credibility issues within the marketplace. Enhancing consumer empowerment, promoting authentic green branding, and improving urban systems will collectively determine whether sustainability becomes a practical, mainstream behaviour rather than an aspirational ideal. The insights generated here provide a grounded understanding of how Indian consumers negotiate their environmental values in everyday life and offer a pathway for future work to build more supportive ecosystems that enable sustainable choices to become the default rather than the exception.

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