



A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF ETHICS MARKETING AND SUSTAINABLE MARKETING ON SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING BEHAVIOR OF CONSUMERS IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>DOI: 10.52932/jfmr.v3i5ene.749</p> <p><i>Received:</i> January 22, 2025</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> August 04, 2025</p> <p><i>Published:</i> November 25, 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Consumer behavior; Ethics marketing; Social media marketing; Sustainable marketing; Sustainable purchasing behavior.</p> <p>JEL codes: M31, Q56, D12, M14, C83</p>	<p>This study examines how ethical and sustainable marketing strategies shape sustainable consumer behavior in Ho Chi Minh City. Focusing on the roles of ethics marketing, sustainable marketing, and social media marketing (SMM), the research explores how these approaches interact to influence sustainable purchase intentions and actual behavior. A survey of 1,512 urban consumers was conducted, and the structural model was tested using SEM. Results indicate that ethics marketing enhances sustainable marketing, which subsequently improves SMM performance. However, ethics marketing also exerts a small but significant negative effect on SMM, reflecting consumer skepticism toward ethical claims on digital platforms. While SMM strongly drives intention, the translation into actual purchasing behavior remains limited due to barriers such as price sensitivity and restricted product availability. The study contributes to the literature by clarifying the interconnected roles of ethical, sustainable, and digital marketing in shaping consumer responses. It also offers practical guidance for marketers and policymakers to develop credible sustainability communication and address the persistent intention-behavior gap.</p>

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1. Introduction

Recent global awareness of sustainability and corporate responsibility has shifted consumer expectations and marketing strategies (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2020; Sarmah & Pratap Singh, 2024). Consumers not only seek quality products but also demand ethical practices and clear commitments to environmental and social issues (Tanveer et al., 2021). As a result, ethical marketing (EM) and sustainable marketing (SM) have become key to building trust and brand loyalty (Singhal, 2023; Gong et al., 2023).

Despite this, a gap persists between positive attitudes toward sustainability and actual buying behaviors, often due to inconsistent business actions and skepticism about greenwashing (Szabo & Webster, 2021; de Jong et al., 2020). This is notable in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), where digitally engaged consumers expect credible sustainability claims but remain wary of exaggerated marketing (Nguyen et al., 2024). Bridging the intention–behavior gap is crucial for encouraging genuine sustainable consumption in such dynamic cities (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Gong et al., 2023).

Social media marketing (SMM) plays a vital role in amplifying ethical and sustainable messages. Transparent, high-quality content can shape attitudes, build trust, and encourage sustainable purchases through perceived social norms (Voorveld et al., 2018; Dash et al., 2023). However, limited research has examined how EM, SM, and SMM together affect sustainable purchasing in Vietnam's unique context.

This study aims to: (1) examine EM's effect on authentic SM practices; (2) explore how EM and SM impact SMM quality and effectiveness; (3) assess SMM's influence on sustainable purchase intentions; and (4) link intentions with actual sustainable buying behaviors.

Through these objectives, the research will enhance theoretical understanding using the

Theory of Planned Behavior and Value-Belief-Norm frameworks and offer actionable insights for marketers and policymakers aiming for effective sustainability communication in HCMC and similar urban markets.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Theoretical foundation

Understanding sustainable purchasing behavior in dynamic urban markets such as Ho Chi Minh City necessitates an integrated theoretical perspective. This study draws upon two well-established behavioral frameworks: the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory (Stern, 2000).

According to TPB, behavioral intention is determined by three cognitive antecedents: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In contrast, the VBN theory emphasizes how internalized values and environmental beliefs generate a sense of personal moral obligation, which drives pro-environmental actions.

To enhance the explanatory power of TPB in the context of sustainability, this study incorporates Environmental Awareness as an additional antecedent of intention. This extension is supported by prior studies demonstrating that individuals who are more aware of environmental issues are significantly more likely to develop sustainable consumption intentions (Kim & Choi, 2005; Bamberg & Möser, 2007). The construct reflects consumers' understanding of ecological problems and their perceived responsibility for environmental outcomes caused by consumption behavior.

By synergistically combining these two theoretical perspectives—TPB's rational-cognitive foundation and VBN's normative-moral dimension—the present study proposes a comprehensive framework for understanding

the psychological drivers of sustainable purchasing behavior. Specifically, we hypothesize that marketing strategies emphasizing ethics, sustainability, and social media engagement can shape the antecedents of intention as outlined in TPB, while simultaneously activating personal norms through values and beliefs as described in VBN theory.

2.2. Hypotheses development

Sustainable Marketing (SM) reflects long-term business practices integrating environmental and social considerations, such as ethical sourcing, eco-friendly packaging, and transparent reporting (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2020). These tangible initiatives generate trustworthy, meaningful content that can be effectively communicated via social media platforms. Prior studies have shown that authentic sustainability actions significantly enhance the quality and credibility of social media messages (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019).

Hypothesis H1: Sustainable Marketing (SM) positively strengthens the quality and credibility of Social Media Marketing (SMM).

Ethical marketing principles-such as honesty, fairness, and consumer respect-are critical in fostering trust and reducing skepticism, especially in digital environments prone to greenwashing and misinformation (Tanveer et al., 2021). When marketing messages are guided by ethical norms, they tend to be perceived as more credible, engaging, and socially valuable (Ardley & May, 2020). Thus:

Hypothesis H2: Ethics Marketing (EM) positively enhances the effectiveness of Social Media Marketing (SMM).

Firms with strong ethical commitments are more likely to implement authentic sustainability initiatives. Ethical orientation drives long-term thinking, accountability, and stakeholder responsibility, all of which align with sustainable business practices (Sheth &

Parvatiyar, 2020). Prior research confirms that ethics often act as a precursor to sustainability adoption (Tanveer et al., 2021). Hence:

Hypothesis H3: Ethics Marketing (EM) positively influences Sustainable Marketing (SM).

Social Media Marketing can shape the three components of intention in the TPB model by: influencing attitudes (through persuasive content), enhancing perceived behavioral control (via informative clarity), and reinforcing subjective norms (through social interaction and peer validation). Empirical evidence indicates that effective SMM strategies significantly strengthen consumer intention toward sustainable purchasing (Voorveld et al., 2018; Dash et al., 2023). Therefore:

Hypothesis H4: Social Media Marketing (SMM) positively influences Intention to Sustainable Purchasing Behavior (ISP).

According to TPB, intention is the most immediate and significant predictor of behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When consumers form strong sustainable intentions- fueled by favorable attitudes, normative alignment, and a sense of control-these intentions often lead to actual behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Thus:

Hypothesis H5: Intention to Sustainable Purchasing Behavior (ISP) positively influences Sustainable Purchasing Behavior (SPB).

This integrated model offers a robust theoretical framework for understanding how marketing strategies grounded in ethics, sustainability, and digital engagement influence sustainable purchasing behavior. The synergy between TPB and VBN theories allows for a nuanced view of how both rational intention formation and moral commitment drive pro-environmental actions. These insights are particularly salient in rapidly urbanizing digital markets such as Ho Chi Minh City, where ethical expectations and online consumer influence are rising concurrently.

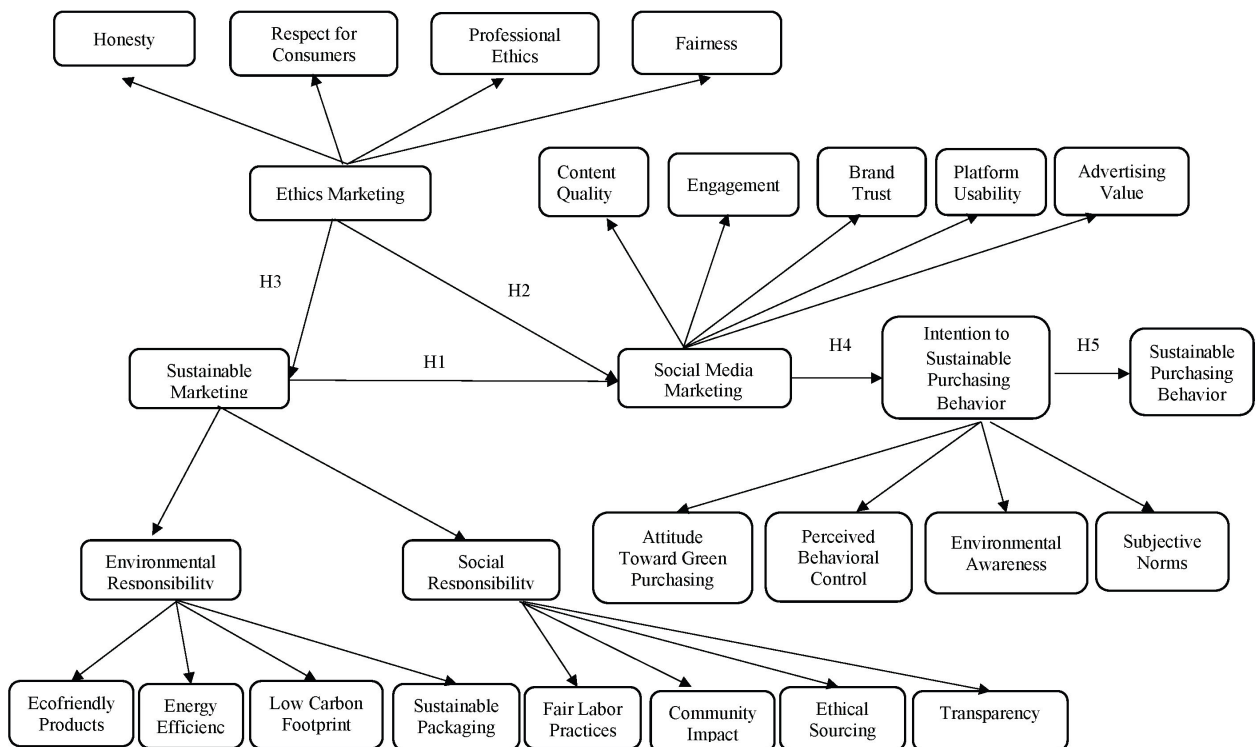


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs a quantitative approach to investigate the factors influencing sustainable purchasing behavior among consumers in Ho Chi Minh City. A structured questionnaire was developed, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” to measure respondents’ perceptions. The research model comprises the following constructs: Ethics marketing, sustainable marketing, social responsibility, environmental responsibility, social media marketing, intention to sustainable purchasing behavior, sustainable purchasing behavior.

3.2. Measurement scales

Each construct in the study was measured using multiple items adapted from validated scales in prior literature and carefully tailored to the context of Ho Chi Minh City to ensure content validity. Specifically, the measurement

model includes the following conceptual groups: Ethics Marketing, covering honesty, respect for consumers, fairness, and professional ethics; Sustainable Marketing, comprising social responsibility and environmental responsibility, with sub-dimensions such as fair labor practices, community impact, ethical sourcing, transparency, eco-friendly products, energy efficiency, low carbon footprint, and sustainable packaging; Social Media Marketing, which captures content quality, engagement, platform usability, advertising value, and brand trust; and core behavioral drivers derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Value-Belief-Norm theory, including subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, environmental awareness, and attitude toward green purchasing. The outcome variables are intention to sustainable purchasing behavior and actual sustainable purchasing behavior. Altogether, the questionnaire consisted of 76 items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale

ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” To verify the quality of the measurement model, the reliability and validity of the scales were rigorously assessed through Cronbach’s Alpha and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), ensuring their appropriateness for subsequent structural equation modeling (SEM).

3.3. Sample size determination

Determining an appropriate sample size is crucial for ensuring the reliability and validity of the study’s findings. According to Hair et al. (2014), a commonly used rule of thumb for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) suggests that the sample size should be at least 5 to 10 times the number of observed variables. Given that our questionnaire consists of 76 items, the recommended minimum sample size would be: 5 observations per item: $76 \times 5 = 380$; 10 observations per item: $76 \times 10 = 760$. In this study, a total of 1,512 valid responses were collected, significantly exceeding the recommended threshold. This large sample size enhances the robustness of the statistical analyses and ensures that the findings can be generalized to the broader population.

3.4. Sampling method

A proportional stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure that the sample accurately represented the demographic structure of urban consumers in Ho Chi Minh City. The population was stratified by gender, age group, and monthly income, using the most recent demographic data from the General Statistics Office (GSO, 2024) as the primary reference.

Given the absence of official public data detailing the gender composition of online shoppers in Vietnam, this study relied on general urban population figures to maintain representativeness. Respondents were selected exclusively through paper-based surveys, administered in person at high-traffic locations,

including five major shopping malls and three community centers across Ho Chi Minh City. A systematic intercept approach was used on-site: for example, every 5th adult passerby was invited to participate. Screening questions ensured that only urban consumers with prior experience purchasing consumer goods were included, and duplicate responses were manually checked and removed to maintain data integrity. The final sample composition is presented in Appendix 3 (*see Appendix 3 online*), demonstrating close alignment with the target demographic structure.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were processed using SPSS and AMOS software. Reliability of the constructs was evaluated through Cronbach’s alpha, while confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the measurement model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then employed to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. The analysis demonstrated that the measurement scales met reliability and validity requirements and that the structural model achieved a good fit with the collected data, providing a sound basis for hypothesis testing.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Respondent’s profile

A total of 1,512 valid responses were collected using proportional stratified random sampling across gender, age, and monthly income groups to ensure representativeness of urban consumers in Ho Chi Minh City. The demographic breakdown aligns with recent official reports, which note that women constitute a large share of online shoppers in Vietnam (Government Portal of Vietnam, 2024).

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the validity and reliability

of the measurement model. All item factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, Composite Reliability (CR) values were greater than 0.80, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpassed 0.50 for each construct, confirming strong convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established, as the square root of the AVE for each construct was higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlations.

Table 2 below presents the Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct. The results confirm that all constructs meet the recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2019), indicating good reliability and convergent validity (*see Appendix 4 online*).

The model fit indices indicate an excellent fit according to established guidelines (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2010):

Table 3. Model fit of CFA

Fit index	Value	Threshold
CMIN/DF	1.652	< 3
NFI	0.949	> 0.90
TLI	0.979	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.021	< 0.08

The Chi-square statistic ($p < 0.001$) is significant, which is typical for large samples; therefore, alternative indices such as CMIN/DF, RMSEA, and comparative fit indices (NFI, TLI) provide a more reliable assessment of model fit. Overall, these indices confirm that the measurement model achieves an excellent level of fit, providing a robust foundation for subsequent structural testing.

4.3. Structural equation modeling

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine the hypothesized structural relationships and to address the four research objectives of this study. The model's goodness-of-fit indices were assessed following recommended standards (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair et al., 2010) and demonstrated an excellent fit to the empirical data.

Table 4. Goodness-of-fit indices

Fit Index	Value	Threshold
CMIN/DF	1.964	< 3
RMSEA	0.025	< 0.05
PCLOSE	1.000	> 0.05
NFI	0.940	> 0.90
TLI	0.969	> 0.90
IFI	0.970	> 0.90
PNFI	0.911	> 0.50
PCFI	0.940	> 0.50
ECVI	5.211	Lower is better
Hoelter (0.05)	800	≥ 200

The Chi-square statistic (CMIN) is significant ($p < 0.001$), which is typical given the large sample size ($N = 1,512$). However, the ratio CMIN/DF remains below 3, indicating acceptable model parsimony. The RMSEA value of 0.025, with a narrow 90% confidence interval and a PCLOSE of 1.000, indicates a close fit to the population covariance matrix. Comparative indices (NFI, TLI, IFI) all exceed 0.90, demonstrating that the structural model fits the data substantially better than the null model. Parsimony indices (PNFI, PCFI) are also robust, ensuring that the model balances fit and simplicity.

Taken together, these results confirm that the structural model is statistically sound, well-specified, and sufficiently generalizable. It thus provides a reliable basis for hypothesis testing and interpretation of the causal paths among ethics marketing, sustainable marketing, social media marketing, and sustainable purchasing behavior.

4.4. Results and discussion

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships, aligned directly with the four research objectives. The results confirm that the model explains sustainable purchasing behavior comprehensively and statistically significantly.

Table 5. Regression weights

Hypothesis	Path coefficient (β) unstanderize	Path coefficient (β) standerize	P-value	Supported
H1: Sustainable Marketing (SM) → Social Media Marketing (SMM)	0.915	1.040	<0.001	Yes
H2: Ethics Marketing (EM) → Social Media Marketing (SMM)	-0.028	-0.027	<0.05	Yes
H3: Ethics Marketing (EM) → Sustainable Marketing (SM)	1.331	1.103	<0.001	Yes
H4: Social Media Marketing (SMM) → Intention to Sustainable Purchasing Behavior (Intention)	0.964	1.086	<0.001	Yes
H5: Intention to Sustainable Purchasing Behavior (Intention) → Sustainable Purchasing Behavior (SPB)	0.515	0.342	<0.001	Yes

This study provides robust insights into the nuanced interrelationships among ethical marketing, sustainable marketing, social media marketing, and sustainable purchasing behavior among urban consumers in Ho Chi Minh City.

Firstly, the significant positive relationship between ethical marketing and sustainable marketing supports Hypothesis H3, reaffirming that businesses which embed ethical principles,

such as honesty, fairness, and professional conduct, are more likely to develop genuine sustainability practices. This finding aligns with Sheth and Parvatiyar (2020) and Eagle and Dahl (2015), who highlighted that ethical values create an organizational culture conducive to sustainable business operations.

Secondly, the positive relationship between sustainable marketing and social media

marketing confirms Hypothesis H1, echoing prior studies (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016; Sujanska & Nadanyiova, 2023) that companies authentically integrating sustainability into their branding tend to generate higher content credibility, trust, and consumer engagement on digital platforms.

Contrary to initial expectations, Hypothesis H2 was not supported, as the study revealed a surprising negative relationship between ethical marketing and social media marketing. This unexpected outcome suggests that when companies emphasize ethical narratives too heavily on social media, consumers in Vietnam's urban market may perceive them as superficial or insincere—reinforcing concerns about greenwashing and eroding trust. Possible explanations include message fatigue due to repetitive ethical claims, limited transparency in online interactions, or culturally specific skepticism towards corporate self-promotion in digital spaces. Future research should further explore how message framing, cultural perceptions of “ethics,” and platform-specific communication styles moderate this relationship to avoid unintended backfire effects.

The findings also verify Hypothesis H4, showing that social media marketing significantly strengthens consumers' intentions to engage in sustainable purchasing. This study adopts the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), a foundational framework in predicting consumer behavior, particularly in sustainability contexts (Nguyen et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2016). Recent extensions of TPB have confirmed its relevance in emerging markets and green purchasing behaviors (Yadav & Pathak, 2017; Chekima et al., 2016).

However, while Hypothesis H5 was supported, the conversion from intention to actual behavior was moderate: the path coefficient ($\beta = 0.515$) indicates that although

urban Vietnamese consumers express a clear intention to purchase sustainable products, this intention does not always translate into consistent action. This aligns with Zhang & Xiao (2023), who argue that factors such as limited product availability, higher prices, ingrained shopping habits, and unclear sustainability claims can inhibit action. Qualitative feedback also suggests that confusion about how to identify credible sustainable products and the lack of diverse sustainable alternatives remain barriers in Vietnam's retail landscape.

When contrasted with Western contexts, where corporate social responsibility and strong brand equity often directly drive consumer loyalty (Seo et al., 2008), this study finds that in Ho Chi Minh City, peer influence and social media credibility play a comparatively greater role. This may stem from Vietnam's collectivist cultural orientation, high social connectedness, and the pervasive integration of social media into daily life for product research and peer endorsement. These socio-cultural nuances underline the need for companies to localize ethical and sustainable branding while avoiding over-generalized global messaging.

In sum, this study achieves its four research objectives and contributes new empirical evidence on how ethical and sustainable marketing interact with social media strategies to influence sustainable purchasing in a rapidly developing urban market. The findings highlight both enablers and barriers, providing actionable implications for managers aiming to build authentic communication strategies and for policymakers designing interventions to bridge the intention–behavior gap.

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1. Conclusions

This study provides robust empirical evidence highlighting the intricate relationships among ethics marketing, sustainable marketing, social

media marketing, and sustainable purchasing behavior in the context of Ho Chi Minh City's fast-growing urban consumer market. The findings confirm that companies that prioritize ethical principles, such as honesty, fairness, and respect for consumers, are more likely to implement credible and effective sustainable marketing strategies, supporting the importance of ethical foundations in fostering authentic sustainability efforts (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2020).

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that sustainable marketing positively enhances the quality and effectiveness of social media marketing, validating that genuine sustainability initiatives amplify brand trust and engagement on digital platforms (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016; Sujanska & Nadanyiova, 2023). However, the unexpected negative relationship between ethics marketing and social media marketing underscores a crucial insight: while ethical narratives are valuable, overemphasizing them on digital channels can lead to consumer skepticism and perceived greenwashing. This highlights the need for nuanced, context-specific online communication strategies to maintain credibility.

The study also verifies that social media marketing significantly strengthens consumer intentions to purchase sustainably, aligning with the theory of planned behavior and its recent extensions in emerging markets (Ajzen, 1991; Yadav & Pathak, 2017). Nonetheless, the moderate path coefficient from intention to actual purchasing behavior reveals persistent barriers, such as price concerns, limited product choices, and habitual consumption patterns (Zhang & Xiao, 2023).

Overall, the research meets its four stated objectives and enriches the theoretical discourse on sustainable consumer behavior by showing how ethical and sustainable marketing, combined with digital engagement, influence both intention and behavior in a rapidly developing urban economy.

5.2. Implications

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to sustainability marketing literature by empirically validating the interconnected roles of Ethics Marketing, Sustainable Marketing, and Social Media Marketing within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior. It extends current understanding by clarifying how these constructs interact to shape sustainable purchase intentions and the partial realization of these intentions as actual consumer behavior.

Managerial implications

For practitioners, the results emphasize that embedding ethical principles into core business and marketing strategies builds the credibility needed for successful sustainability branding. Managers should focus on authentic sustainability actions and avoid overusing ethical claims online to prevent consumer backlash. Social media remains a critical lever for engaging consumers, but must be used strategically, with transparent, verifiable content that resonates with local cultural norms. Businesses should also address practical barriers by ensuring accessible pricing, clear product labeling, and diverse sustainable product lines.

Policy implications

Policymakers should support companies in adopting ethical and sustainable practices through incentives, certification programs, and public awareness campaigns. Educational initiatives can help consumers better identify credible sustainable products and understand the real impact of their purchasing choices, thereby narrowing the intention-behavior gap.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses solely on Ho Chi

Minh City, which may limit generalizability to other urban or rural areas within Vietnam or other developing economies. Comparative studies across multiple regions and cultural contexts are recommended to validate these findings. Second, the cross-sectional design captures consumer attitudes and behaviors at a single point in time and does not account for dynamic shifts in perceptions and market trends. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into how these relationships evolve. Third, reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce social desirability bias. Future research should triangulate findings using behavioral tracking, experiments, or mixed methods to strengthen validity.

Additionally, this study did not investigate possible moderating or mediating variables—

such as consumer trust levels, perceived greenwashing, or personal environmental values—which may influence the strength or direction of the relationships identified. Exploring these variables could yield a more nuanced understanding of sustainable purchasing behavior. Finally, deeper qualitative exploration using focus groups or in-depth interviews could uncover psychological drivers and barriers that quantitative surveys may overlook, helping to design more effective interventions to close the gap between intention and actual behavior.

In summary, addressing these limitations will advance the field by refining knowledge on how ethical, sustainable, and digital marketing practices shape sustainable consumption in emerging economies.

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