

UNDERSTANDING THE PRICE - SUSTAINABILITY TRADE-OFF IN ONLINE CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: A GREEN MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The increasing integration of sustainability into marketing practices has significantly influenced consumer decision-making in online retail environments. At the same time, price sensitivity continues to play a critical role in shaping online purchase behaviour, often creating a trade-off between consumers' sustainability intentions and their willingness to pay. Positioned within a green marketing perspective, this study examines the price-sustainability trade-off in online consumer behaviour using a conceptual research approach.

The paper is based on a systematic review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and industry reports related to price sensitivity, green marketing, sustainable consumption, and e-commerce behaviour. Drawing on established theoretical perspectives and prior empirical findings, the study develops a conceptual framework that explains the relationships among price sensitivity, sustainability orientation, perceived value, and online purchase intention.

The study further advances a set of research propositions that illustrate how price considerations may limit or constrain sustainable consumption in online markets. The analysis suggests that while consumers increasingly express concern for environmental sustainability, price-related factors continue to act as a significant barrier to actual green purchasing behaviour in e-commerce contexts. The study contributes to marketing theory by integrating pricing and sustainability perspectives within a single conceptual framework and offers practical insights for marketers designing green pricing and promotional strategies. The proposed model also provides a foundation for future empirical research on sustainable online consumer behaviour.

Keywords: Price sensitivity, sustainability, green marketing, online consumer behaviour, e-commerce, perceived value, purchase intention, conceptual framework

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of e-commerce has fundamentally transformed consumer purchasing behaviour by increasing access to information, enhancing price transparency, and enabling easy comparison across products and platforms. Online retail environments intensify consumers' sensitivity to price due to frequent promotions, dynamic pricing, and instant access to alternative offerings (Kotler & Keller, 2016). As a result, price has emerged as a dominant factor influencing online purchase decisions, particularly in competitive digital markets.

At the same time, growing environmental concerns and heightened awareness of sustainability issues have led to increased interest in responsible and ethical consumption. Consumers are increasingly exposed to sustainability-oriented messages through green marketing initiatives, eco-labels, and corporate social responsibility communications (Peattie & Crane, 2005). Prior research suggests that many consumers express favourable attitudes toward environmentally sustainable products and brands, indicating a positive shift in values and preferences (Joshi & Rahman, 2015).

However, despite this growing awareness, sustainable consumption does not always translate into actual purchasing behaviour. Numerous studies highlight a persistent gap between consumers' environmental attitudes and their market behaviour, often referred to as the attitude-behaviour or value-action gap (Carrington et al., 2010). One of the primary reasons for this gap is price sensitivity, as sustainable products are frequently perceived as more expensive than conventional alternatives (White et al., 2019). In online settings, where consumers can instantly compare prices and discounts, this tension between sustainability intentions and affordability becomes even more pronounced.

From a marketing and management perspective, understanding the trade-off between price sensitivity and sustainability is essential for firms seeking to promote green products without losing price-competitive advantage. While existing literature has extensively examined pricing strategies and green consumer behaviour as separate streams, relatively limited attention has been given to their integrated role in shaping online consumer behaviour. Moreover, much of the existing research is empirical in nature, with fewer studies offering conceptual frameworks that systematically explain how price considerations interact with sustainability orientation in digital consumption contexts.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a conceptual approach to examine the price-sustainability trade-off in online consumer behaviour. By synthesizing insights from prior literature on price sensitivity, sustainable consumption, and e-commerce

marketing, the study develops a conceptual framework that explains the relationships among various variables.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section reviews existing studies relevant to the price-sustainability trade-off in online consumer behaviour. The literature is organised thematically to provide a structured understanding of key concepts and to support the development of the proposed conceptual framework.

1. Price Sensitivity in Online Consumer Behaviour

Price sensitivity refers to the degree to which consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced by changes in price. In online environments, price sensitivity tends to be higher due to increased transparency, ease of comparison, and the availability of alternative sellers (Xia, Monroe, & Cox, 2004). E-commerce platforms allow consumers to compare prices across brands and retailers in real time, thereby intensifying competitive pressure and reinforcing price-driven decision-making (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Prior studies suggest that online consumers often rely on price cues as indicators of value, particularly in categories where product differentiation is limited (Lichtenstein, Ridgway, & Netemeyer, 1993). Frequent exposure to discounts and promotional offers further conditions consumers to delay purchases until favourable price points are available. As a result, price sensitivity has been identified as a key determinant of online purchase intention, repeat buying behaviour, and platform loyalty.

2. Sustainability and Green Consumer Behaviour

Sustainability in consumption refers to purchasing behaviour that considers environmental, social, and ethical consequences. Green consumer behaviour has received growing attention as consumers become more aware of climate change, resource depletion, and corporate responsibility (Peattie & Crane, 2005). Research indicates that many consumers express positive attitudes toward environmentally friendly products and demonstrate concern for sustainable business practices (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). However, sustainable consumption is influenced by multiple factors, including environmental awareness, personal values, social norms, and perceived consumer effectiveness (White et al., 2019). In online contexts, sustainability information is often communicated through eco-labels, certifications, and green marketing messages. While such signals can positively influence attitudes, their impact on actual purchase behaviour remains inconsistent, suggesting the presence of intervening constraints.

3. The Price-Sustainability Trade-off

A recurring theme in sustainability literature is the gap between consumers' pro-environmental attitudes and their actual purchasing behaviour. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the attitude-behaviour or value-action gap, highlights the difficulty consumers face in translating sustainable intentions into concrete buying decisions (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). One of the most frequently cited barriers contributing to this gap is price.

Several studies indicate that sustainable or green products are often perceived as more expensive than conventional alternatives, which reduces consumers' willingness to purchase despite favourable attitudes (Gleim et al., 2013). Price sensitivity thus plays a moderating role, limiting the influence of sustainability orientation on purchase decisions. In highly competitive online markets, where discounts and price promotions are prominent, consumers may prioritise economic value over environmental considerations, reinforcing the trade-off between price and sustainability.

4. Perceived Value as a Linking Mechanism

Perceived value is widely recognised as a central construct in consumer behaviour research, reflecting consumers' overall assessment of the benefits received relative to the costs incurred (Zeithaml, 1988). In the context of sustainable consumption, perceived value extends beyond functional benefits to include environmental and ethical value. Studies suggest that when consumers perceive green products as offering superior overall value, their willingness to accept higher prices increases (Chen & Chang, 2012).

In online settings, perceived value can mediate the relationship between sustainability orientation and purchase behaviour by helping consumers justify price premiums associated with green products. However, when perceived value is insufficient or poorly communicated, price sensitivity dominates decision-making. This highlights the importance of effective green value communication in reducing the perceived price burden of sustainable offerings.

5. Theoretical Perspectives Supporting the Trade-off

The price-sustainability trade-off can be explained through established consumer behaviour theories. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests that consumers prioritise basic and economic needs before higher-order ethical or self-expressive goals, which may explain why price considerations often outweigh sustainability concerns in purchase decisions (Maslow, 1943). Additionally, perceived value theory and green marketing frameworks provide insights into how consumers evaluate trade-offs between economic and environmental benefits.

Together, these theoretical perspectives support the view that sustainable consumption in online markets is shaped by a complex interaction between price sensitivity, value perception, and sustainability orientation.

RESEARCH GAP

The review of existing literature reveals substantial research on price sensitivity, sustainability, and online consumer behaviour

as independent areas of study. Numerous studies have examined how price influences online purchase decisions, while others have focused on consumer attitudes toward sustainability and green consumption. However, despite the growing relevance of sustainability in digital markets, these streams of research largely remain fragmented.

One key gap lies in the limited integration of price-related factors and sustainability considerations within a unified framework, particularly in the context of e-commerce. While consumers increasingly express concern for environmental issues, prior studies suggest that price continues to dominate actual purchase decisions. However, there is insufficient conceptual clarity on how this trade-off operates in online environments where price transparency, frequent discounts, and competitive pricing are common. Most existing studies address this issue empirically, without offering a broader conceptual explanation of the underlying relationships.

Additionally, research has paid relatively less attention to the role of perceived value in bridging the gap between sustainability orientation and purchase behaviour. Although perceived value has been discussed in both pricing and green marketing literature, its function as a connecting mechanism in online sustainable consumption remains underexplored. This limits the ability of marketers and researchers to fully understand why positive sustainability attitudes do not consistently translate into green purchasing behaviour.

From a practical perspective, marketers and e-commerce firms face challenges in promoting sustainable products without losing price-sensitive consumers. However, the literature provides limited guidance on how pricing and sustainability strategies can be aligned effectively in online retail settings. The absence of an integrative conceptual model makes it difficult to derive actionable insights for designing green pricing and promotional strategies.

Addressing these gaps, the present study seeks to develop a conceptual framework that explains the price-sustainability trade-off in online consumer behaviour. By synthesizing insights from pricing, sustainability, and digital marketing literature, the study aims to provide a structured understanding of how price sensitivity and sustainability orientation jointly influence online purchase decisions, thereby offering both theoretical clarity and practical relevance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to conceptually examine the trade-off between price sensitivity and sustainability considerations in shaping online consumer behaviour. As consumers increasingly encounter sustainable products in digital marketplaces, understanding how pricing influences their purchase decisions becomes critical for both theory and practice. Specifically, the study aims to:

- To review and synthesise existing literature on price sensitivity, sustainability, and online consumer behaviour.
- To develop a conceptual framework that explains the interaction between price-related factors and sustainability orientation in online purchase decisions.
- To examine the role of perceived value as a mediating construct between price sensitivity, sustainability considerations, and purchase intention.
- To propose research propositions that can guide future empirical studies in the area of sustainable e-commerce consumption.
- To derive managerial insights that support the design of effective pricing and sustainability strategies in online retail environments.

These objectives are aligned with the need to move beyond fragmented studies and offer a structured conceptual understanding of consumer decision-making in digital markets.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this study is primarily conceptual and theoretical in nature. It is based on an extensive review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, industry reports, and relevant academic publications in the fields of marketing, consumer behaviour, sustainability, and e-commerce.

The study focuses on online consumer behaviour across e-commerce platforms, with particular emphasis on price sensitivity and sustainability-related attributes such as environmental concern, ethical consumption, and green product perception. While the discussion draws from global literature, the insights are applicable to both developed and emerging markets, where price considerations and sustainability awareness often coexist in complex ways.

The study does not involve primary data collection or empirical testing of hypotheses. Instead, it seeks to offer a conceptual foundation that future researchers can empirically validate using quantitative or qualitative methods. By doing so, the paper aims to contribute to theory development while remaining relevant to practitioners navigating the price-sustainability challenge in online retailing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual research design based on secondary data sources to examine the price-sustainability trade-off in online consumer behaviour. Conceptual research is appropriate for this study as the objective is not to test relationships empirically, but to develop a theoretically grounded framework that explains how price sensitivity and sustainability considerations interact in digital purchasing contexts.

The research design focuses on theory development and synthesis by integrating insights from existing literature across multiple domains, including pricing, sustainability, consumer behaviour, and e-commerce marketing.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawn from credible and peer-reviewed sources. These include:

- Academic journal articles from reputed databases
- Books and edited volumes on marketing and consumer behaviour
- Conference papers relevant to sustainability and digital commerce
- Industry reports and publications related to e-commerce and green marketing

Priority was given to recent studies to ensure relevance to contemporary online retail environments, while seminal works were also included to provide theoretical grounding.

Literature Selection and Analysis

A systematic and thematic approach was followed to review and analyse the literature. Relevant studies were identified using keywords such as price sensitivity, sustainability, green marketing, online consumer behaviour, and perceived value. The selected literature was then categorised into key themes aligned with the objectives of the study.

The analysis involved comparing and synthesising findings across studies to identify patterns, contradictions, and emerging insights. This thematic synthesis enabled the identification of key constructs and relationships that form the basis of the proposed conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

From a green marketing perspective, sustainability orientation reflects consumers' responsiveness to environmentally and ethically positioned products. Drawing from pricing theory, sustainable consumption literature, and consumer decision-making models, the framework integrates key constructs that influence online purchase intention in digital marketplaces.

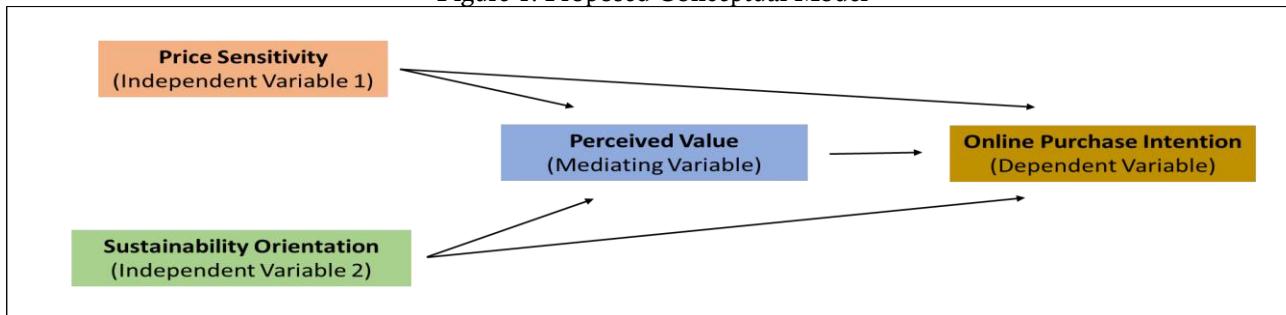
Online consumers are frequently exposed to price comparisons, discounts, and promotional offers, making price sensitivity a dominant factor in e-commerce decisions. At the same time, growing awareness of environmental and ethical concerns has increased the relevance of sustainability attributes in product evaluation. However, consumers often experience a trade-off between affordability and sustainability, particularly in online contexts where price transparency is high.

The framework proposes price sensitivity and sustainability orientation as the primary independent variables influencing online purchase intention. While price sensitivity reflects the degree to which consumers respond to price changes and discounts, sustainability orientation captures consumers' concern for environmental and ethical aspects of products.

Perceived value is positioned as a mediating variable in the framework. It represents the consumer's overall evaluation of the benefits received relative to the cost paid, incorporating both functional and ethical considerations. The model suggests that sustainability attributes can enhance perceived value, but high price sensitivity may weaken this effect if sustainable products are perceived as expensive.

By incorporating perceived value as a mediator, the framework explains why positive attitudes toward sustainability do not always result in actual purchase behaviour. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how consumers balance economic and sustainability considerations when making online purchase decisions.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model



The proposed conceptual model illustrates the relationships between price sensitivity, sustainability orientation, perceived value, and online purchase intention. The model suggests that consumers' sensitivity to price changes directly influences their purchase decisions in online environments, where price transparency and competitive pricing are prominent.

At the same time, sustainability orientation positively affects purchase intention by shaping consumers' ethical and environmental evaluations of products. However, this influence is not always direct. Perceived value plays a mediating role by integrating both economic and sustainability-related benefits into a single evaluative judgment.

The model further indicates that while sustainability attributes can enhance perceived value, high price sensitivity may weaken this effect if sustainable products are perceived as costly. By incorporating both direct and indirect relationships, the framework provides a structured explanation of the price-sustainability trade-off in online consumer behaviour.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

Based on the proposed conceptual framework and the synthesis of existing literature, the following research propositions are developed to explain the relationships between various variables.

P1: Price sensitivity has a significant negative influence on online purchase intention.

Consumers who are highly sensitive to price are less likely to purchase products online when prices are perceived as high, even in the presence of additional benefits.

P2: Sustainability orientation has a positive influence on online purchase intention.

Consumers with stronger environmental and ethical concerns are more inclined to prefer and purchase sustainable products in online retail settings.

P3: Price sensitivity negatively influences perceived value.

Higher price sensitivity reduces consumers' overall evaluation of value, particularly when sustainable products are associated with premium pricing.

P4: Sustainability orientation positively influences perceived value.

Consumers with higher sustainability orientation are more likely to perceive sustainable products as offering greater overall value due to ethical and environmental benefits.

P5: Perceived value has a positive influence on online purchase intention.

When consumers perceive higher value in a product, they are more likely to convert positive attitudes into actual purchase decisions.

P6: Perceived value mediates the relationship between price sensitivity and online purchase intention.

The negative effect of price sensitivity on purchase intention is partially explained through its impact on perceived value.

P7: Perceived value mediates the relationship between sustainability orientation and online purchase intention.

The positive influence of sustainability orientation on purchase intention operates through enhanced perceptions of value.

DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY INSIGHTS

The proposed conceptual framework offers an integrated understanding of how price sensitivity and sustainability orientation jointly influence online consumer behaviour. Unlike studies that examine these factors in isolation, the framework highlights the tension consumers experience when economic considerations intersect with ethical and environmental concerns in digital marketplaces.

A key insight from the framework is the dominant role of price sensitivity in online purchase decisions. In e-commerce environments characterised by high price transparency and frequent promotional offers, consumers are more likely to prioritise monetary value over sustainability attributes. This suggests that even consumers with positive sustainability attitudes may hesitate to purchase green products if they perceive prices to be uncompetitive. The framework therefore helps explain the commonly observed gap between consumers' stated environmental concern and their actual purchasing behaviour.

Another important insight relates to the role of sustainability orientation. The framework acknowledges that sustainability considerations positively shape consumers' evaluations and can directly influence online purchase intention. However, this influence is not uniform across consumers and is contingent on how sustainability attributes are translated into perceived benefits. The model thus recognises sustainability orientation as a meaningful but conditional driver of online consumption.

The inclusion of perceived value as a mediating construct is a central contribution of the framework. Perceived value serves as the mechanism through which both price sensitivity and sustainability orientation are integrated into a single evaluative judgment. When sustainability features enhance functional, emotional, or ethical value without significantly increasing perceived cost, consumers are more likely to justify their purchase decisions. Conversely, high price sensitivity can diminish perceived value, even when sustainability benefits are acknowledged.

The framework also highlights the importance of balancing direct and indirect effects. While price sensitivity and sustainability orientation can independently influence purchase intention, their indirect effects through perceived value provide deeper insight into consumer decision-making. This dual-path structure strengthens the explanatory power of the model and reflects the complexity of real-world online purchasing behaviour.

Overall, the conceptual framework contributes to marketing and sustainability literature by offering a structured explanation of the price-sustainability trade-off in online contexts. It provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research while also offering practical insights for e-commerce firms seeking to align pricing strategies with sustainability initiatives. By positioning perceived value at the centre of the decision-making process, the framework moves beyond simplistic assumptions and captures the nuanced trade-offs faced by contemporary online consumers.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual insights from this study offer several important implications for managers operating in online retail and e-commerce environments, particularly those dealing with sustainable and green products. As price sensitivity continues to shape online purchase behaviour, managers must recognise that sustainability alone may not be sufficient to influence buying decisions unless it is accompanied by a clear value proposition.

First, pricing strategies for sustainable products need to be carefully designed to address the concerns of price-sensitive consumers. While premium pricing may reflect higher production or sourcing costs, excessive price differences between sustainable and conventional products can discourage purchase. Managers should explore flexible pricing mechanisms such as limited-time discounts, bundled offers, or loyalty-based incentives to reduce perceived financial risk and enhance value perception.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of communicating sustainability benefits in a way that strengthens perceived value. Managers should move beyond generic green claims and clearly articulate how sustainability attributes translate into tangible benefits for consumers, such as product durability, quality, health, or long-term savings. Effective value communication can help justify price differences and make sustainability a meaningful part of the purchase decision.

Third, e-commerce platforms can use digital tools to segment consumers based on their price sensitivity and sustainability orientation. For consumers with high sustainability concern, targeted messaging that emphasises ethical impact and environmental responsibility may be effective. For more price-sensitive segments, managers can focus on affordability, comparative value, and promotional incentives while gradually introducing sustainability-related information.

Finally, the study suggests that perceived value plays a critical role in bridging the gap between sustainability attitudes and actual purchase behaviour. Managers should therefore adopt an integrated approach that aligns pricing, promotion, and sustainability initiatives rather than treating them as separate strategies. By embedding sustainability within the overall value proposition, firms can appeal to both economically and ethically motivated consumers in competitive online markets.

CONCLUSION

This study conceptually examined the trade-off between price sensitivity and sustainability orientation in shaping online consumer behaviour. By integrating insights from pricing, sustainable consumption, and e-commerce literature, a conceptual framework was developed that highlights the direct and indirect influences of price and sustainability on online purchase intention, with perceived value serving as a central mediating construct. The study underscores that while consumers increasingly value sustainability, price considerations continue to play a dominant role in online purchasing decisions. By presenting a structured understanding of these relationships, the framework offers both theoretical contributions and practical guidance for marketers seeking to promote sustainable products without compromising competitiveness in digital marketplaces. Overall, the study advances knowledge on sustainable consumer behaviour in e-commerce by providing a holistic perspective that links economic and ethical considerations, paving the way for future empirical validation and strategy development.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a conceptual study, the framework is based solely on secondary literature and does not involve primary empirical data. Consequently, the proposed relationships remain theoretical and require empirical testing to validate their applicability in real-world online marketplaces.

Second, the study focuses primarily on price sensitivity, sustainability orientation, perceived value, and purchase intention, leaving out other potentially relevant factors such as brand trust, social influence, product category differences, or technological usability, which could affect online consumer decisions.

Third, while the study draws from global literature, contextual factors such as cultural differences, regional sustainability awareness, and market maturity are not explicitly considered. These factors may influence the strength or direction of the proposed relationships in different geographies.

Future research can address these limitations in several ways. Empirical studies using surveys, experiments, or longitudinal data can test the proposed conceptual relationships and propositions across various consumer segments and product categories. Comparative studies across countries or cultural contexts can explore how socio-economic and cultural factors moderate the price-sustainability trade-off. Additionally, future work can expand the framework by incorporating other mediators or moderators, such as brand credibility, digital trust, or perceived convenience, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of

online sustainable consumption.

By addressing these limitations, future research can not only validate and refine the proposed conceptual model but also offer actionable insights for marketers aiming to design effective pricing, promotion, and sustainability strategies in e-commerce settings.

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