



Green digital marketing and sustainable purchase intention: The mediating role of environmental concern and brand trust

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Abstract

Since consumers are demanding more sustainable products and business practices which alleviate global environmental challenges. Simultaneously, the digitalization of commerce has changed how brands express their green strategies. The association between green digital marketing and consumers' sustainable purchase intention: The article attempts. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior and signaling theory, this conceptual paper proposes a dual-mediation model. It contends that green digital marketing does not merely serve as a direct trigger of purchase intention. However, green digital marketing is reliant on two important mediating variables: environmental concern and brand trust. Through this, consumers can be educated about the issues that can improve their eco-concern. At the same time, a transparent and authentic digital communication mitigates scepticism and greenwashing concern to generate brand trust. The combination of the increase in environmental concern and established brand trust increases sustainable purchase intention. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review on the modern digital marketplace. Also, the paper formulates several testable propositions. Further, the paper provides significant theoretical and managerial implications.

Keywords: Green digital marketing, sustainable purchase intention, environmental concern, brand trust, greenwashing, sustainability

Introduction

The 21st century has been characterized by two sets of global megatrends: an urgent need for environmental sustainability and a fast-paced world of digitalised communications and commerce (Smith & Brower, 2012) ^[21]. As a result of rising climate issues, scarcity and environmental pollution, there has been an increasing concern amongst consumers. Modern consumers are not just passive users of goods. They are becoming aware of the environmental impact of their consumption. This awareness has led to the creation of the "green consumer" which refers to a person who looks for products and services that do not harm the environment (Peattie, 2001) ^[18]. Due to this reason, companies have started to apply the sustainability concept in the field of business. This gave rise to green marketing, which is the marketing of products that are presumed to be environmentally safe (Polonsky, 1994) ^[16], which has started. Nonetheless, with the site of consumer interaction shifting from media to digital, green marketing has transformed into green digital marketing. Green digital marketing utilizes digital activities to promote the green message of a brand and cause. You can use social media, SEO, email marketing, and content marketing solutions to do so. Here, a brand engages the customers to promote a green message or a product that is eco-friendly. According to Carrington, Neville & Whitwell (2010) ^[2], despite the growth of green digital campaigns, there still exists a "attitude-behaviour gap" with respect to sustainable consumption. Consumers appear to have a positive attitude toward environmental protection. Nonetheless, they do not exhibit correspondence in behaviour or intentions. The presence of this gap indicates that the relationship between green digital marketing exposure and purchase decision-making is not simply a linear one. It is a complicated but

interesting psychological process that is affected by various intervening factors. According to this article green digital marketing is effective for sustainable purchase intention due to environmental concern and brand trust. Although digital marketing contributes information, the success of digital marketing, however, is contingent on it first attuning to the consumer's internal environmental concern or amplifying that issue (Dunlap & Jones, 2002) ^[8]. Moreover, at the time of "greenwashing" (where advertisers falsely assert the environmental benefits of a product or practice (Delmas and Burbano, 2011) ^[7]), brand trust is a necessary filter. Green digital marketing will be met with skepticism and dismissed, however advanced it may be, if it doesn't have trust. The main aim of this article is to conceptually model and extensively review the mediating roles of environmental concern and brand trust in the relationship between green digital marketing and sustainable purchase intention. By delving into these pathways, this article seeks to add to the literature on sustainable consumer behaviour and to offer marketers guidance on developing effective and authentic green digital communications.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

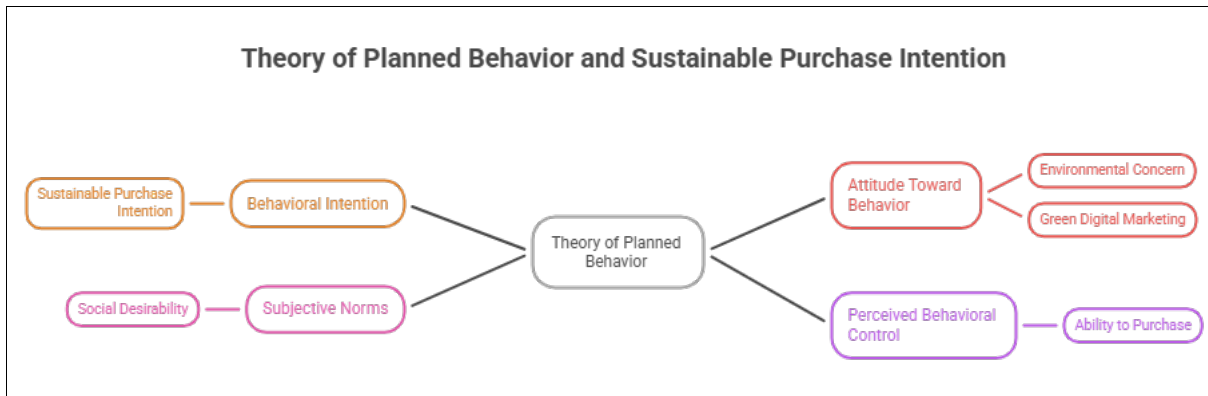
To examine the mechanisms for sustainable consumption it is important to base the analysis on established psychological and marketing theories. The conceptual model outlined in this paper is grounded in two major theories: the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Signaling Theory.

1. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

According to Ajzen (1991) ^[1], the Theory of Planned Behavior is one of the most popular theory of human behaviour prediction. As per TPB, behavioral intention of

any individual determines the individual behaviour. Intention, in turn, shaped by three components to the base of

the theory, are attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control.



In this research, sustainable purchase intention refers to the behavioural intention which is being studied. The “attitude” component is greatly influenced by environmental concern. Thus, a consumer who has a high level of environmental concern will have a naturally positive attitude towards the purchase of eco-friendly products (Paul *et al.*, 2016) [17]. Green digital marketing is considered an external variable which can influence the beliefs underlying attitude and perceived norm and lead to a change in attitude and perceived norm as information about damage due to environmental hazards and social desirability of green consumption is conveyed.

2. Signaling Theory

Brand trust and green digital marketing can relate to signaling theory (Spence, 1973) [22]. In the marketplace, there is often an asymmetry of information between the buyer and seller; the seller knows the true environmental impact of their product while the buyer does not. In order to mitigate the effects of this asymmetry, sellers send various "signals" to buyers to reveal the unobservable quality of the product (environmental sustainability in this case). One of

the main signals sent out is via green digital marketing. A signal must be credible in order to be effective. Companies create incorrect signals when they greenwash, generating noise and causing consumers to become skeptical (Chen & Chang, 2013) [6]. Consequently, the measure of brand trust is one that consumers use to assess the credibility of signals sent through green digital marketing. When a consumer trusts a brand, they believe the signals sent by the brand are genuine and this creates trust.

3. Defining the Core Constructs

3.1 Green Digital Marketing

Green marketing has been traditionally defined as the development and promotion of products and services that satisfy customers’ needs and wants for quality, performance, and price, with minimal impact on the environment (Polonsky, 1994) [20]. Digital marketing has incorporated adaptation of these principles online. It means using internet, mobile devices, social media, search engine and other digital channels to communicate sustainability messages to consumers.



It is characterized by several unique features compared to traditional marketing:

Interactivity and Two-Way Communication: Social media platforms allow brands to engage in dialogues with consumers about sustainability, rather than just broadcasting messages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) [12].

Targeting and Personalization: Digital analytics enable marketers to target specific demographic segments that exhibit higher environmental consciousness with tailored green messages.

Measurability: The impact of digital campaigns can be tracked through metrics such as click-through rates,

engagement rates, and conversion rates, allowing for rapid optimization.

Reduced Physical Footprint: The medium itself is often perceived as "greener" (e.g., email vs. direct mail), although the energy consumption of digital infrastructure is a growing concern (Jones, 2015) [10].

3.2 Sustainable Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is the probability that a consumer will buy a particular product. Sustainable purchase intention, therefore, refers to the conscious and deliberate willingness of a consumer to purchase products or services that have positive social, economic, and environmental impacts, or at least minimize negative impacts (Chen, 2001) [4]. It is the critical antecedent to actual sustainable behavior and is considered a reliable predictor of future sales of green products.

3.3 Environmental Concern

Environmental concern refers to the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them or indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution

(Dunlap & Jones, 2002) [8]. It is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional affect (how one feels about the environment), cognitive knowledge (what one knows about environmental issues), and conative commitment (the readiness to act) (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002) [13].

3.4 Brand Trust (Green Trust)

In the context of environmental marketing, general brand trust is often specified as "green trust." Chen (2010) [5] defines green trust as "a willingness to depend on a product, service, or brand based on the belief or expectation resulting from its credibility, benevolence, and ability about its environmental performance." It involves consumer confidence that the brand will fulfill its environmental promises and act with integrity regarding ecological issues.

The Impact of Green Digital Marketing on Sustainable Purchase Intention

While this paper argues for the necessity of mediators, it is essential to first establish the baseline relationship between the independent variable (green digital marketing) and the dependent variable (sustainable purchase intention).



Digital marketing serves as the primary conduit through which modern consumers discover, research, and evaluate products. When a brand effectively utilizes digital channels to communicate its sustainability efforts, it increases consumer awareness of its green product lines (Leonidou, Katsikeas, & Morgan, 2013) [15]. For instance, a well-executed social media campaign highlighting a clothing brand's use of recycled ocean plastics can directly stimulate desire and intent to purchase among its followers.

Furthermore, digital marketing provides the convenience of immediate action. An interactive Instagram ad or a targeted Google search result can lead a consumer directly to an e-commerce platform where a sustainable purchase can be executed with a single click. The pervasive nature of digital marketing means that consumers are constantly exposed to normative messages about sustainability, which, according to TPB, shapes their subjective norms and increases the likelihood of forming a sustainable purchase intention (Ajzen, 1991) [1].

However, empirical studies frequently show mixed results regarding this direct effect. While exposure to green digital marketing generally correlates with higher purchase intention, the strength of this relationship is often moderate and highly variable across different consumer segments and product categories (Joshi & Rahman, 2015) [11]. This variability strongly implies the presence of mediating factors that either amplify or dampen the effect of the marketing stimuli.

Proposition 1: Green digital marketing has a positive, though potentially variable, direct effect on sustainable purchase intention.

The Mediating Role of Environmental Concern

The first crucial pathway through which green digital marketing influences purchase intention is by modulating the consumer's level of environmental concern.

1. Green Digital Marketing to Environmental Concern

Marketing is not merely reflective of consumer desires; it is also highly constitutive. It has the power to shape societal values and raise awareness about critical issues. Green digital marketing, specifically, acts as an educational and sensitizing agent.

Through content marketing—such as blog posts, documentaries published on YouTube, or infographics shared on Pinterest—brands can disseminate factual information about environmental degradation. For example, an outdoor apparel company might use its digital platforms to publish detailed reports on the impact of microplastics on marine life. This dissemination of knowledge directly targets the cognitive dimension of environmental concern (Peattie & Crane, 2005) ^[19].

Moreover, digital marketing is highly adept at leveraging emotional appeals. Powerful visual storytelling on platforms like Instagram and TikTok can evoke empathy and urgency. A short video demonstrating the effects of deforestation on

endangered species can bypass cognitive filters and directly elicit an emotional response, thereby heightening the affective dimension of environmental concern.

By consistently feeding consumers with information and emotional stimuli regarding the state of the planet, green digital marketing serves to elevate baseline levels of environmental concern among the target audience.

Proposition 2: Green digital marketing positively influences and increases consumers' environmental concern.

2. Environmental Concern to Sustainable Purchase Intention

The link between environmental concern and sustainable behavior is one of the most extensively studied relationships in environmental psychology. Individuals with high environmental concern exhibit a stronger intrinsic motivation to align their behaviors with their values (Steg & Vlek, 2009) ^[23].



When a consumer holds a deep-seated concern for the environment, they view their purchasing decisions as a mechanism for exerting positive change or, at minimum, reducing their personal complicity in ecological damage. High environmental concern translates into a highly favorable attitude toward green products, which, according to the Theory of Planned Behavior, directly dictates a strong purchase intention (Ajzen, 1991; Paul *et al.*, 2016) ^[1, 17].

Furthermore, consumers with high environmental concern are more likely to actively seek out green alternatives, engage in comparative evaluations of products' environmental footprints, and express a willingness to pay a premium for sustainable goods (Laroche, Bergeron, & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001) ^[14].

Proposition 3: Higher levels of environmental concern are positively associated with stronger sustainable purchase intentions.

3. The Mediation Effect

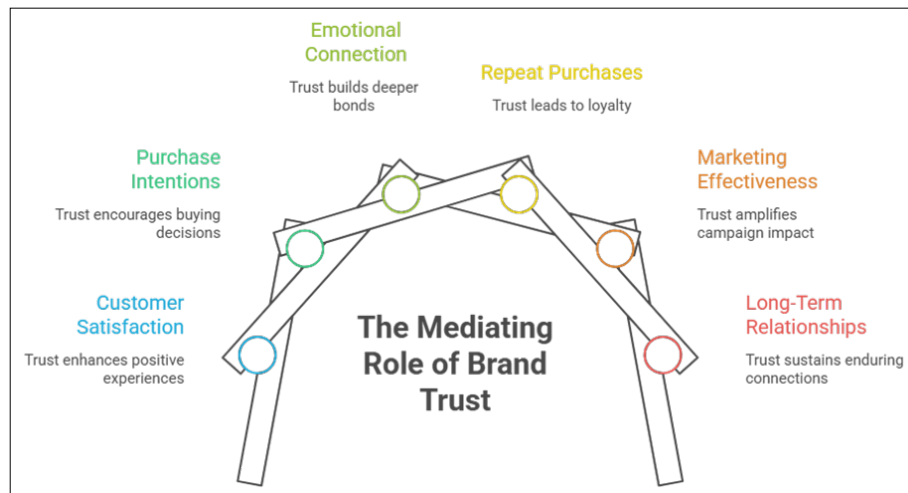
Synthesizing Propositions 2 and 3 establishes the mediating

Role of environmental concern. Green digital marketing does not operate in a vacuum; it acts upon the consumer's psyche. When a digital campaign successfully educates or emotionally moves a consumer, it raises their internal environmental concern. It is this newly elevated state of concern that subsequently drives the intention to purchase the sustainable product being marketed. Therefore, environmental concern acts as a psychological bridge linking the external marketing stimulus to the internal behavioral intention.

Proposition 4: Environmental concern mediates the relationship between green digital marketing and sustainable purchase intention.

The Mediating Role of Brand Trust

While environmental concern addresses the consumer's internal value system, brand trust addresses the consumer's evaluation of the external entity—the brand sending the marketing signal. In the digital age, trust is the currency of commerce.



1. The Threat of Greenwashing

The necessity of brand trust in green marketing cannot be overstated due to the pervasive issue of greenwashing. As consumer demand for sustainable products has surged, so too has the temptation for corporations to exaggerate or fabricate their environmental credentials to capture market share (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) [7]. Greenwashing includes practices such as using vague language ("eco-friendly" with no substantiation), highlighting a minor green attribute while obscuring major environmental violations, or utilizing fake third-party endorsements.

The proliferation of greenwashing has cultivated a highly skeptical consumer base (Chen & Chang, 2013) [6]. When consumers encounter a green digital advertisement, their default cognitive stance is increasingly one of doubt. They ask, "Is this brand truly sustainable, or is this just a marketing ploy?" If the consumer perceives the marketing as greenwashing, the signal is rejected, and sustainable purchase intention is nullified.

2. Green Digital Marketing to Brand Trust

How, then, does green digital marketing build trust rather than skepticism? The answer lies in the quality, transparency, and authenticity of the digital communication. Digital platforms offer unique capabilities for establishing trust that traditional media lack:

Radical Transparency: Brands can use their websites to publish comprehensive, interactive sustainability reports, supply chain maps, and carbon footprint audits. Providing verifiable data satisfies the consumer's need for proof, thereby reducing perceived risk and building trust (Leonidou et al., 2013) [15].

Third-Party Verification: Digital marketing can seamlessly integrate and link to credible third-party certifications (e.g., Fair Trade, LEED, B Corp). These external validations act as objective signals of quality and credibility.

Authentic Engagement: Social media allows for two-way conversations. Brands that openly respond to consumer queries about their environmental practices, admit to areas needing improvement, and avoid defensive posturing foster a perception of benevolence and integrity—core components of brand trust (Chen, 2010) [5].

When green digital marketing is perceived as informative, transparent, and verifiable, it significantly enhances the consumer's green trust in the brand.

Proposition 5: Transparent and verifiable green digital marketing positively influences green brand trust.

3. Brand Trust to Sustainable Purchase Intention

Trust is a fundamental prerequisite for any transaction, but it is especially critical for sustainable purchases, which often involve a price premium and require the consumer to believe in intangible future benefits (e.g., reducing carbon emissions) (Chen, 2010) [5].

When a consumer trusts a brand's green claims, their perceived risk associated with the purchase decreases. They are confident that their money is actually supporting sustainable practices rather than merely padding corporate profits through deceptive marketing. High brand trust reduces cognitive friction and validates the consumer's choice, acting as a powerful catalyst that converts a general interest in sustainability into a firm intention to purchase from that specific brand.

Conversely, a lack of trust acts as an insurmountable barrier. Even if a consumer possesses high environmental concern, they will not form a purchase intention toward a brand they suspect of greenwashing (Chen & Chang, 2013) [6].

Proposition 6: Green brand trust is positively associated with sustainable purchase intention.

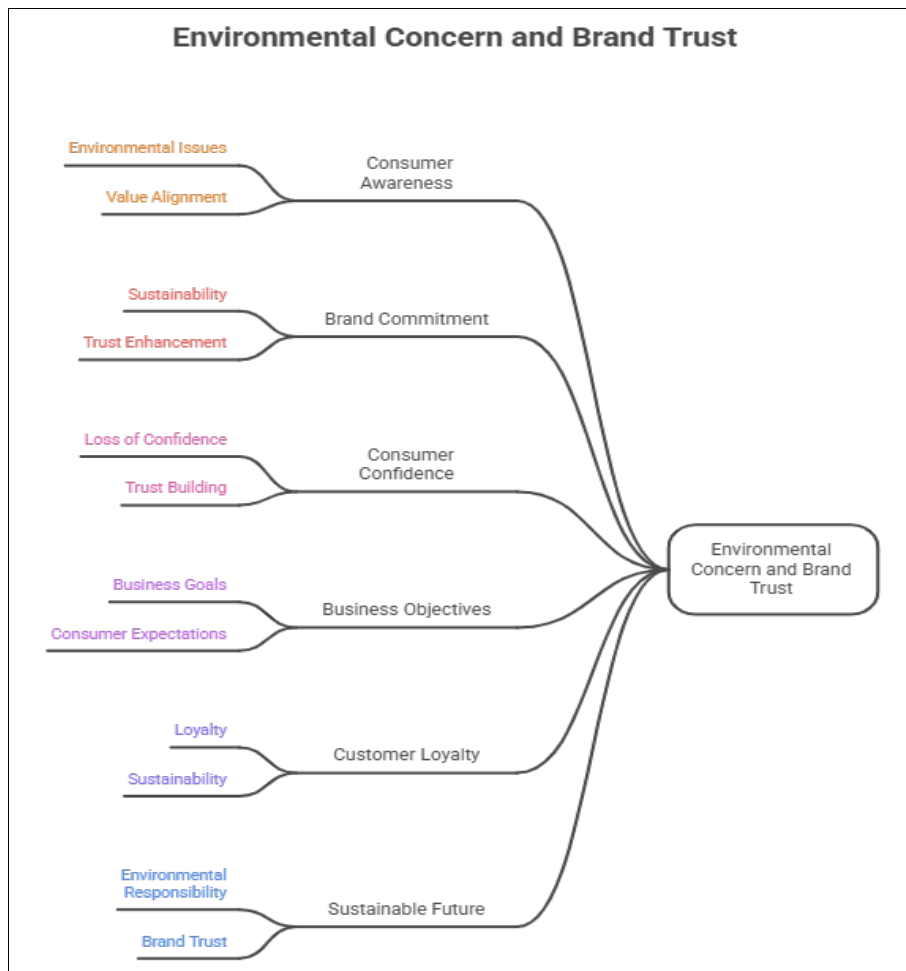
4. The Mediation Effect

The second mediational pathway is thus established. Green digital marketing initiatives that prioritize transparency, provide concrete evidence of environmental performance, and engage in authentic communication successfully cultivate brand trust. This solidified trust, in turn, assures the consumer of the validity of their purchase, directly leading to an increased sustainable purchase intention. Brand trust mediates the relationship by filtering out skepticism and validating the marketing signal.

Proposition 7: Brand trust mediates the relationship between green digital marketing and sustainable purchase intention.

The Interplay between Environmental Concern and Brand Trust

While the preceding sections have analyzed environmental concern and brand trust as separate, parallel mediators, it is vital to recognize their dynamic interplay within the consumer's decision-making process. The pathways are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are deeply intertwined.



1. Trust Validating Concern

A consumer may possess high environmental concern, making them eager to purchase sustainable goods. However, this concern makes them more vigilant and critical of green marketing claims, as they are deeply invested in the outcome (Goh & Balaji, 2016) [9]. For these highly concerned consumers, brand trust is even more critical. Transparent green digital marketing builds the trust necessary to satisfy their rigorous standards, allowing their environmental concern to successfully translate into purchase intention. Without trust, their concern leads to skepticism and inaction.

2. Concern Facilitating Trust

Conversely, green digital marketing that successfully raises a consumer's environmental concern (through education and emotional engagement) can create a sense of shared values between the consumer and the brand. When a brand takes the time to educate the consumer on a critical environmental issue, the consumer may perceive the brand as a benevolent leader in sustainability. This perception of shared values and corporate benevolence inherently fosters brand trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) [16].

3. A Dual-Mediation Model

Therefore, the most robust conceptual model proposes a dual, and potentially sequential, mediation.

Effective green digital marketing operates simultaneously on two fronts:

The Cognitive/Affective Front: It educates and engages, raising Environmental Concern.

The Evaluative Front: It provides transparent data and authentic communication, building Brand Trust.

When both mediators are activated—when a consumer cares deeply about the environment and implicitly trusts the brand providing the solution—the probability of sustainable purchase intention is maximized.

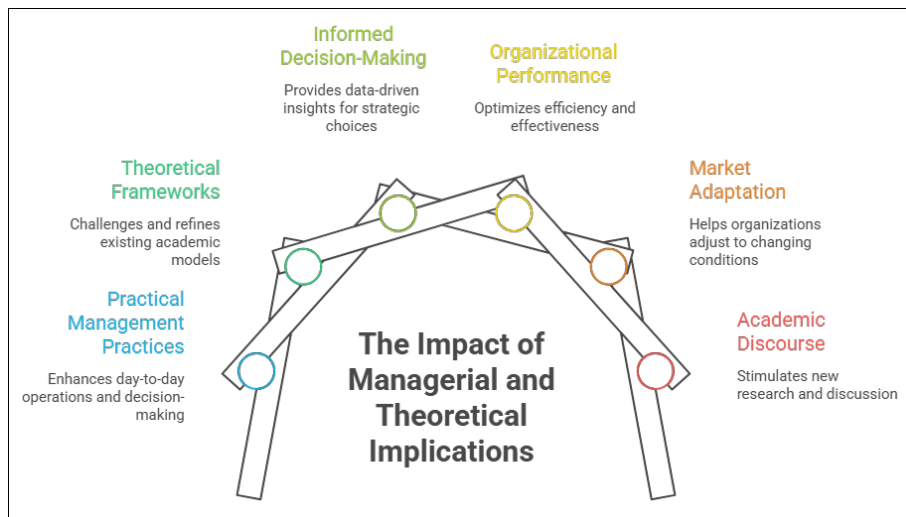
Proposition 8: Environmental concern and brand trust operate as concurrent mediators, interactively strengthening the impact of green digital marketing on sustainable purchase intention.

Managerial and Theoretical Implications

The conceptual model proposed in this article yields significant implications for both academic theory and practical marketing strategy.

1. Theoretical Implications

First, this article contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption by moving beyond simple stimulus-response models. By integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior and Signaling Theory, it provides a more granular understanding of the psychological "black box" that exists between digital marketing exposure and consumer behavior.



Second, the dual-mediation model underscores the necessity of distinguishing between internal values (environmental concern) and external evaluations (brand trust). While previous studies have often conflated these or studied them in isolation, this paper argues that they are distinct yet interacting mechanisms that must both be satisfied to bridge the attitude-behavior gap in green consumption.

Third, by situating the analysis specifically within the realm of digital marketing, this paper updates traditional green marketing literature. It highlights how the unique characteristics of digital media—such as interactivity, rapid dissemination of information, and the capacity for radical transparency—uniquely influence the mediation processes.

2. Managerial Implications

For marketing practitioners and brand managers, understanding these mediating pathways is crucial for designing effective campaigns that yield actual ROI, rather than just superficial engagement.

2.1 Shift from Selling to Educating: Marketers must recognize that green digital marketing cannot solely rely on traditional persuasive techniques. To activate the "environmental concern" mediator, campaigns must be fundamentally educational. Brands should utilize content marketing to inform their audience about the specific environmental issues their products address. By raising the baseline level of concern, brands cultivate a more receptive target audience.

2.2 Radical Transparency as the Antidote to Greenwashing: To activate the "brand trust" mediator, brands must preempt consumer skepticism. Vague claims like "earth-friendly" are no longer sufficient and may actively harm trust. Digital marketing must be hyper-transparent. Brands should utilize their digital real estate to publish detailed life-cycle assessments, verifiable supply chain audits, and third-party certifications. If a brand cannot prove its green claims digitally, it should not make them.

2.3 Embrace Vulnerability and Authentic Engagement: Trust is built on perceived benevolence and integrity. Brands should use social media not just as a broadcast channel, but as a forum for authentic dialogue. Admitting to areas where the company is still struggling to achieve sustainability goals can paradoxically build

more trust than presenting a flawless, yet unbelievable, green facade.

2.4 Consistency across Digital Touchpoints: A consumer's journey often spans multiple digital channels (e.g., seeing an ad on Facebook, searching on Google, visiting the website). The sustainability message—and the evidence backing it—must be consistent across all touchpoints. A disjointed digital presence will trigger skepticism and erode the brand trust necessary for purchase intention.

2.5 Targeting Based on Concern Levels: Using advanced digital analytics, marketers should segment their audiences based on their pre-existing levels of environmental concern. Highly concerned segments require less educational content and more rigorous proof (focusing on the trust mediator). Segments with lower concern may require more emotionally engaging, educational content (focusing on the concern mediator) before they are presented with a direct call to purchase.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this conceptual paper provides a comprehensive framework, it is not without limitations, which present fertile ground for future empirical research.

First, the proposed model is conceptual and requires empirical validation. Future researchers should develop robust survey instruments to quantitatively test the proposed hypotheses using structural equation modeling (SEM) across diverse demographic segments and product categories.

Second, the model treats "green digital marketing" as a monolithic construct. Future research should disaggregate this variable to determine if different digital channels (e.g., social media influencer marketing vs. search engine marketing) have differential impacts on the mediating variables. For instance, does an endorsement by a trusted eco-influencer build brand trust faster than a transparent sustainability report on a corporate website?

Third, the moderating role of product type needs investigation. The mediating effects of concern and trust may differ significantly when a consumer is evaluating a low-involvement, frequent purchase (like eco-friendly dish soap) versus a high-involvement, infrequent purchase (like an electric vehicle or solar panels).

Finally, future studies should explore cultural moderators. Environmental concern and the propensity to trust corporate entities vary significantly across different national and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural studies would test the global applicability of the dual-mediation model.

Conclusion

As the digital landscape becomes the primary arena for brand-consumer interaction, green digital marketing has emerged as a vital tool for promoting sustainable consumption. However, the path from digital advertisement to sustainable purchase intention is fraught with psychological complexity. This article has argued that exposure to green marketing is insufficient on its own; it must successfully navigate the critical mediators of environmental concern and brand trust.

For green digital marketing to be effective, it must operate as both a teacher and a transparent entity. It must educate and emotionally engage consumers to elevate their internal environmental concern, making them receptive to sustainable solutions. Simultaneously, it must combat the pervasive threat of greenwashing by providing verifiable, authentic, and transparent information that builds unshakeable brand trust.

Only by successfully activating both of these psychological pathways can brands bridge the attitude-behavior gap. In the modern eco-conscious economy, mastering the nuances of these mediators is not merely a marketing optimization strategy; it is an imperative for driving genuine sustainable purchasing behavior and achieving long-term commercial success in harmony with planetary boundaries.

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