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PSYCHOLOGY OF GREEN GUILT: FROM EMOTIONAL GUILT TO SUSTAINABLE PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT: *Despite increasing awareness of environmental issues, consumers often struggle to translate their concern into consistent sustainable purchasing behaviour. This study examines the role of green guilt in influencing consumers' intention and actual behaviour toward eco-friendly products, while also identifying the key factors that encourage or hinder such choices. Primary data were collected from 170 respondents using a structured questionnaire. The analysis reveals that green guilt is widely felt and encourages consumers to reflect on the environmental impact of their purchases. However, the rank analysis indicates that practical factors play a stronger role in influencing eco-friendly product choice. Lower price and easy availability emerged as the most important determinants, followed by clear eco-labels and product quality, while discounts and rewards had the least influence. These findings suggest that although emotional factors such as green guilt shape positive intentions, economic and situational factors ultimately determine actual behaviour. The study highlights the need to address affordability, accessibility, and clarity of information to effectively bridge the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable consumption.*

KEYWORDS: *Green guilt, Sustainable consumption, Purchase intention, Consumer behaviour, Intention-behaviour Gap.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, awareness about environmental issues has increased considerably, and many consumers are now more conscious of how their purchasing decisions affect the planet. However, this growing awareness does not always translate into action. A clear gap often exists between consumers' intentions to purchase sustainable products and their actual buying behaviour. This phenomenon commonly referred to as the *intention-behaviour gap*, highlights the reality that even environmentally concerned consumers may continue to choose conventional products due to factors such as convenience, price sensitivity, or ingrained habits.

An important psychological factor contributing to this gap is *green guilt*, which refers to the uneasy or guilty feelings consumers experience when they believe their choices are environmentally harmful. Green guilt can shape both the intention to act sustainably and actual purchasing behaviour. While feelings of guilt may encourage consumers to choose eco-friendly products, they can also result in avoidance or resistance, particularly when individuals feel overwhelmed by sustainability expectations or uncertain about the credibility of environmental claims. As a result, understanding the role of green guilt in consumer decision-making becomes crucial for promoting sustainable consumption.

Sustainable purchasing behaviour is further influenced by a range of psychological and social factors. Ethical concerns, such as a sense of responsibility toward the environment and future generations, can intensify guilt-driven motivations to make sustainable choices. Social norms shaped by family, peers, and broader societal expectations also play a significant role in guiding consumer behaviour. Additionally, trust in green marketing claims is a critical factor. When consumers suspect greenwashing or misleading information, their skepticism can reduce the impact of guilt and discourage sustainable purchasing decisions.

This study seeks to explore how green guilt influences consumers' intentions and actual behaviour when purchasing sustainable products, as well as to assess the gap between the two. It also examines the moderating roles of ethical concerns, social norms, and trust in green marketing claims in shaping guilt-driven sustainable consumption. By gaining deeper insight into these relationships, the research aims to offer practical recommendations for marketers and policymakers to encourage sustainable purchasing in ways that are effective, credible, and emotionally balanced.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Today, many consumers express concern for the environment and show a willingness to support sustainable products. Yet, during actual purchasing situations, their choices often fail to reflect these intentions. This mismatch between what people plan to do and what they eventually do is referred to as the *intention-behaviour gap*.

A key factor contributing to this gap is *green guilt*, which arises when individuals feel uneasy about the environmental impact of their consumption. In some cases, this sense of guilt encourages consumers to make more responsible choices. However, it can also have the opposite effect. When people feel pressured or emotionally burdened, they may avoid engaging with sustainability issues altogether or rationalize their less sustainable choices.

Sustainable purchasing decisions are also shaped by several other influences. Ethical concerns, such as respect for animal welfare or support for fair trade practices, can strengthen environmentally responsible intentions. Social norms formed by the expectations of family, peers, and society further guide consumer behaviour. Additionally, trust in green marketing claims plays a crucial role. When consumers question whether products are genuinely eco-friendly, feelings of guilt may turn into doubt or frustration, reducing the likelihood of sustainable purchasing.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore how green guilt influences both consumers' intentions and their actual purchasing behaviour toward sustainable products. It also examines how ethical concerns, social norms, and trust in green marketing claims shape these decisions, helping to better understand the factors that either bridge or widen the intention-behaviour gap.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- I. To examine how green guilt influences consumers' intention and actual behaviour toward purchasing sustainable products, and the intention-behaviour gap between them.
- II. To evaluate the role of ethical concerns, social norms, and trust in green marketing claims in shaping guilt-driven sustainable consumption decisions.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fehr, J. C. (2023) The study explores how guilt-based and empathy-based messages in green advertising influence the purchase intentions of consumers who identify as environmentally conscious. Using an experimental survey approach, participants were shown one of three types of advertisements—guilt-focused, empathy-focused, or neutral—and then asked about their willingness to purchase the advertised product. Surprisingly, empathy appeals did not perform better than guilt appeals. In fact, advertisements with no emotional appeal at all generated the highest purchase intention, followed by guilt-based messages, while empathy-based ads were the least effective. These findings suggest that emotional messaging does not always strengthen persuasion among green consumers and may sometimes backfire due to feelings of manipulation or emotional overload. The study emphasizes the importance of carefully framing sustainability messages and indicates that simple, factual, and non-emotional advertising may resonate more strongly with environmentally conscious consumers. Overall, the research challenges the assumption that emotional appeals are universally effective in encouraging sustainable product choices.

Nielsen, R. S., Gamborg, C., & Lund, T. B. (2024) The study looks at how people experience eco-guilt and eco-shame in their everyday lives and how these emotions shape their environmental behaviour. Through in-depth interviews, the authors identify common situations that trigger these feelings, including overconsumption, travel choices, and not meeting personal sustainability standards. The findings suggest that eco-guilt is usually linked to specific behaviours and often encourages positive action, such as cutting down on waste or choosing more sustainable products. Eco-shame, on the other hand, is tied to how individuals view themselves more broadly and can sometimes result in avoidance, denial, or disengagement rather than meaningful change. While both emotions influence environmental decision-making, guilt appears to be more effective in motivating pro-environmental behaviour. The study concludes that sustainability communication should use emotional appeals carefully; promoting a sense of responsibility without creating excessive shame that could weaken long-term commitment.

Kotchen, M. J. (2009) The article examines the concept of “green guilt” in the context of voluntary carbon offsets, questioning whether such offsets genuinely reduce greenhouse gas emissions or merely help consumers ease their environmental guilt. Kotchen explains that voluntary carbon offsets allow individuals to compensate for their emissions by funding environmental projects, such as reforestation or renewable energy initiatives. While the offset market has grown rapidly due to rising climate awareness and emotional appeals, the author argues that its overall impact on climate change remains limited. From an economic perspective, voluntary offsets function like charitable contributions to a public good and therefore suffer from free-rider problems. However, the article acknowledges that offsets can provide psychological benefits, such as guilt alleviation and increased environmental awareness, which may encourage participation. Kotchen concludes that while carbon offsets are better than inaction, they should not replace direct efforts to reduce emissions and must be supported by stronger standards and regulation to ensure real environmental benefits.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive research approach to understand how green guilt influences consumers' intentions and actual behaviour toward purchasing sustainable products. Primary data were collected from 170 respondents through a structured questionnaire. The respondents came from different age

groups and income levels, allowing the study to capture a range of consumer perspectives. A convenience sampling method was used, as it made it easier to reach participants who were willing to share their views. The questionnaire included simple statements and multiple-choice questions that focused on feelings of green guilt, purchase intentions, real buying behaviour, and the reasons consumers continue to choose non-eco-friendly products despite being environmentally aware. The responses were analyzed using percentage analysis, rank analysis, and chi-square tests to identify patterns and examine the influence of demographic factors on purchasing decisions.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Green Guilt and Consumer Psychology

S.No	Consumer perception	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rank
1	I feel guilty when I buy products that are harmful to the environment.	30	64	36	5	5	3
2	I feel uneasy when I ignore eco-friendly alternatives while shopping.	28	60	42	8	2	1
3	I believe my consumption choices contribute to environmental problems.	32	56	42	6	4	2
4	Feelings of guilt make me reconsider my purchasing decisions.	28	60	40	10	2	4
5	I feel responsible for reducing environmental damage through my purchases.	30	70	32	6	2	5
	TOTAL	148	310	192	35	15	

Source: Primary data

The responses clearly show that green guilt is a common and meaningful experience for consumers, rather than an abstract or distant concept. A large proportion of respondents agree that they feel guilt, discomfort, and responsibility when their purchasing choices negatively affect the environment. This suggests that environmental concerns are emotionally embedded in consumers' everyday decision-making. The very small number of respondents who disagreed indicates that rejection of green guilt is minimal, reinforcing its psychological relevance.

Many respondents reported feeling guilty when buying products that harm the environment and uneasy when they ignore eco-friendly alternatives. This highlights that green guilt can arise both after making an unsustainable purchase and at the moment of choosing convenience over sustainability. The strong agreement with the belief that personal consumption contributes to environmental problems reflects an internalized sense of responsibility, where consumers recognize their own role in environmental degradation rather than attributing it solely to external actors.

The findings also show that guilt often prompts reflection, with many respondents agreeing that feelings of guilt make them reconsider their purchasing decisions. This indicates that green guilt functions as a self-regulating emotion, encouraging consumers to think more carefully about the consequences of their choices. The strongest agreement observed in feelings of responsibility for reducing environmental damage suggests a growing perception of sustainability as a personal moral obligation.

However, the notable presence of neutral responses points to a gap between awareness and action. While consumers may acknowledge environmental responsibility and experience guilt, these feelings

do not always translate into consistent sustainable behaviour. Practical constraints such as price sensitivity, convenience, and limited access to eco-friendly products may weaken the impact of green guilt on actual purchasing decisions, reflecting the broader intention-behaviour gap in consumer psychology.

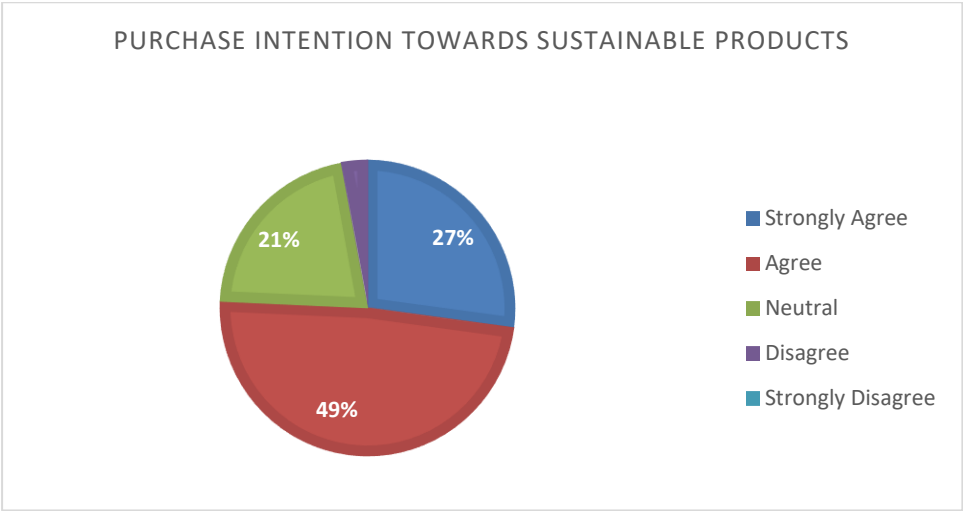


Chart 1: Purchase Intention towards Sustainable Products

Source: Primary data

The chart shows that most people genuinely want to buy sustainable products. Nearly half of the respondents agree that they intend to choose sustainable options, and more than a quarter strongly agree. This clearly suggests that positive attitudes toward sustainability are already in place and that many consumers feel inclined to make environmentally responsible choices when shopping. At the same time, about one-fifth of respondents remain neutral. This group likely represents consumers who care about sustainability but feel unsure or conflicted when it comes to actual purchases. Factors such as higher prices, limited availability, or lack of clear information may make them hesitate, even though they do not oppose sustainable products. Very few respondents express negative intentions, with only a small percentage disagreeing and almost none strongly disagreeing. This shows that resistance to sustainable consumption is minimal. Instead, the real challenge lies in helping consumers move from *wanting* to buy sustainable products to *actually* doing so. Overall, the chart reflects a hopeful picture—people are largely on board with sustainability, but they need the right support, incentives, and convenience to turn good intentions into everyday purchasing habits.

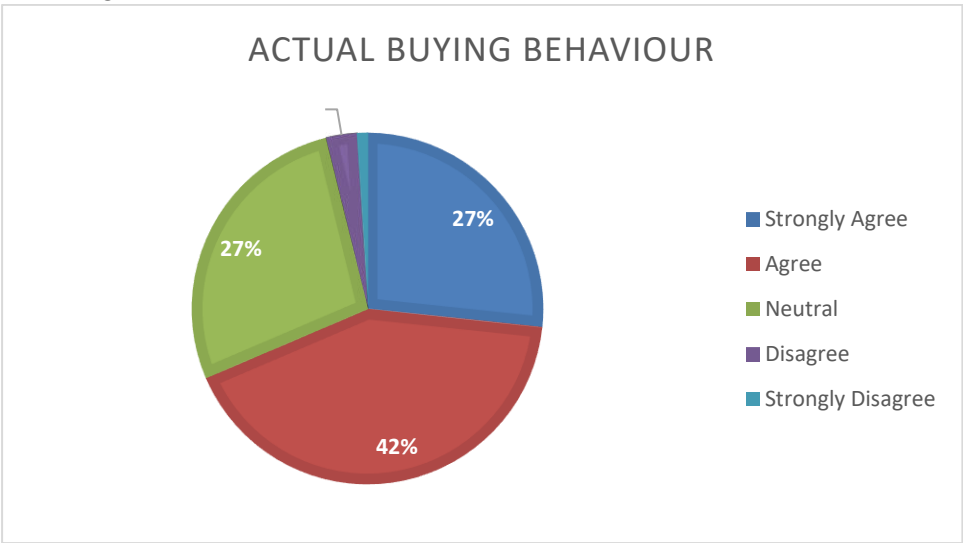


Chart 2: Actual Buying Behaviour

Source: Primary data

The chart shows how people actually behave when it comes to making purchases, giving a more realistic view than simply asking what they *intend* to do. While many respondents still report positive sustainable behaviour, the strength of that commitment seems a bit weaker in practice. About 42% say they regularly make eco-friendly purchases, and another 27% strongly agree, showing that a good number of consumers do try to make sustainable choices when they can.

At the same time, around 27% remain neutral, which suggests that what people *say* they do and what they *actually* do don't always match up. This group probably represents those who buy sustainable products occasionally, but not consistently often because of everyday hurdles like price, convenience, habit, or limited availability.

Only a small fraction of respondents report negative behaviour, meaning very few actively avoid sustainable products. Overall, the chart highlights a noticeable gap between positive attitudes and real-world purchasing habits. It shows that while people care about sustainability, turning that concern into regular action isn't always easy.

Table 2: Factors Driving the Purchase of Environmentally Harmful Products Despite Environmental Awareness

S.No	Reason for Purchase	Number of Responses	Percentage
1	It is more affordable than eco-friendly alternatives	48	24
2	Eco-friendly alternatives are not easily available	36	18
3	I prioritize convenience and comfort	32	16
4	I am influenced by brand image or advertisements	22	11
5	I doubt whether eco-friendly products actually make a difference	20	10
6	I lack sufficient information about sustainable alternatives	18	9
7	Social pressure or habits influence my purchase decisions	14	7
8	I do not consider environmental impact at the time of purchase	10	5

Source: Primary data

This multiple-choice question shows that even when people know a product is harmful to the environment; their buying decisions are often driven by practical reasons. Most respondents chose "It is more affordable than eco-friendly alternatives", followed by limited availability and convenience, indicating that cost and ease matter more than concern at the moment of purchase.

Other reasons such as the influence of brands, doubts about eco-friendly products, lack of information, and habitual buying also play a role. Overall, the results highlight a common gap between what people care about and what they actually do while shopping, especially when money, access, and convenience are involved.

Table 3: Social and Situational Influences on the Adoption of Eco-Friendly Products

S.No	Reason for buying Eco-friendly products if	Number of Responses	Percentage
1	My friends/family also use them	92	46
2	It is the default option	84	42
3	It is recommended by influencers	66	33
4	It is widely used by others	78	39
5	It gives social recognition	54	27

Source: Primary data

The findings show that social surroundings play a strong role in encouraging the adoption of eco-friendly products. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported purchasing eco-friendly products because their friends or family members also use them. This highlights the importance of close social

circles in shaping environmentally responsible behavior, suggesting that people are more likely to adopt sustainable products when such choices are normalized within their immediate environment.

Additionally, 42% of respondents indicated that they choose eco-friendly products because they are presented as the default option, showing that convenience and system-driven choices significantly influence consumer decisions. Products being widely used by others also had a noticeable impact, with 39% of respondents stating this as a motivating factor, reinforcing the idea that collective behavior and social acceptance encourage sustainable consumption. Recommendations by influencers influenced 33% of respondents, indicating a moderate impact of digital and public figures on eco-friendly purchasing decisions. In contrast, social recognition was the least influential factor (27%), suggesting that most consumers are motivated more by practical and social conformity reasons rather than the desire for social status.

Table 4: Factors Influencing choice of Eco Friendly products

S.No	Factors	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	Final Rank
1	Lower price	2.32	320	1
2	Easy availability	2.36	326	2
3	Clear eco labels	2.46	340	3
4	Better quality/ performance	2.48	342	4
5	Discount/ rewards for green choices	2.51	346	5

Source: Primary data

The rank analysis shows that **price is the most important factor** influencing the choice of eco-friendly products. Consumers are more willing to buy sustainable options when they are affordable. **Easy availability** is ranked second, highlighting that convenience strongly affects eco-friendly purchasing decisions. **Clear eco-labels** come next, indicating that consumers value simple and trustworthy information when identifying green products. **Product quality or performance** is ranked fourth, suggesting it matters, but less than price and access. **Discounts or rewards** rank last, showing that incentives alone are not enough to drive sustainable choices. Overall, the results suggest that making eco-friendly products affordable, accessible, and clearly labeled is more effective than relying on promotional offers.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test Results for Age, Gender, and Monthly Income

S.No	Demographic Factors	Variable	P- Value	Chi Square value	Results
1	Age	Reason for Buying Non-Eco Products Despite Guilt	0.042	25.61	Significant
2	Gender		0.051	11.03	Not Significant
3	Monthly Income		0.003	34.82	Highly Significant

Source: Primary data

The chi-square analysis was carried out to understand whether age, gender, and monthly income are related to the reasons why consumers continue to purchase non-eco-friendly products despite feeling guilty. The results show that age has a significant relationship with the stated reasons for such behavior ($\chi^2 = 25.61$, $p = 0.042$), suggesting that people from different age groups justify their choices in different ways. In contrast, gender does not show a significant association with the reasons for purchasing non-eco-friendly products ($\chi^2 = 11.03$, $p = 0.051$), indicating that both male and female respondents tend to report similar reasons such as price, convenience, or habit. On the other hand, monthly income shows a highly significant association with the reasons for continuing non-eco purchases ($\chi^2 = 34.82$, $p = 0.003$), highlighting that income level plays an important role in shaping consumer decisions. Lower-income respondents are more likely to be influenced by price, while higher-income groups appear to consider other factors. Overall, the findings suggest that age and income

significantly influence consumer behavior, whereas gender does not have a meaningful impact on the reasons for purchasing non-eco-friendly products despite feelings of guilt.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Focus on Affordable Pricing:** Since lower price ranked as the most influential factor, businesses and policymakers should work toward reducing the cost of eco-friendly products through subsidies, incentives, or cost-efficient production methods.
2. **Improve Product Availability:** Easy availability was identified as a key driver of eco-friendly choices. Retailers should ensure that sustainable products are widely accessible across both online and offline platforms.
3. **Strengthen Eco-Labeling Practices:** Clear and trustworthy eco-labels help consumers identify sustainable products quickly. Standardized and transparent labeling can reduce confusion and build confidence in green claims.
4. **Maintain Product Quality and Performance:** Eco-friendly products should meet consumer expectations in terms of quality and usability to encourage repeat purchases and long-term adoption.
5. **Use Incentives as Supportive Tools:** Discounts and rewards should be used as supporting measures rather than the main strategy, as they were found to have the least influence on consumer choice.

8. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that green guilt plays a meaningful role in shaping consumer attitudes toward sustainable consumption. Most consumers recognize their responsibility toward the environment and express a willingness to make eco-friendly choices. However, this willingness often weakens during actual purchasing situations due to practical barriers such as cost, convenience, limited access, and uncertainty about the authenticity of sustainable products. While green guilt encourages self-reflection and moral responsibility, it does not automatically lead to sustained behavioural change. The findings also highlight the importance of social and situational factors, particularly social norms and default options, in encouraging eco-friendly purchasing. The significant influence of age and income further suggests that sustainable consumption is shaped by both emotional and economic considerations. Overall, the study concludes that reducing the intention-behaviour gap requires more than emotional motivation. A combination of credible information, supportive social environments, and accessible sustainable options is essential to encourage long-term environmentally responsible consumer behaviour.

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