

# Is it Sustainable consumption era? A study focus on Oman consumer behavior

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## Abstract:

**Background:** Consumers' purchasing habits for sustainable food have been studied in this research. This research aims to determine what influences customers' purchasing decisions about sustainable food, how income and price affect those decisions, and what main restrictions stand in consumers' way of buying sustainable food.

**Materials and methods used:** Primary data was gathered with the use of a standardized questionnaire, and collected data were analyzed by using frequency analysis, Mean, standard deviation, T-test, Chi-Square test, and Correlation. In this study, snowball sampling was used, and data was collected from 100 respondents.

**Results:** Customers' purchasing decisions are influenced by a variety of factors, according to the findings of this study, including price, availability, nutritional value, knowledge of the product, marketing tactics used by companies to raise awareness of the product, product quality, chemical contamination, and flavor, among others. Respondents responded that pricing was an important consideration when purchasing a sustainable product. As a result of the research, it has concluded that a person's income does not have a significant impact on their purchasing habits for sustainable product

**Conclusion:** This study provides in-depth knowledge about the customer's attitudes and perceptions towards organic food based on several aspects discussed in the research.

**Keyword:** Sustainable, consumer behavior, decision making

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## I. Introduction

In today's world, natural resources are exponentially depleting, bio-diversity is gradually disintegrating and the environment is deteriorating. many of these problems stem from unsustainable consumption patterns. "Sustainable development" has slowly gained popularity in many countries, the idea of increasing human development while also maintaining the environment's ability to provide resources seems appealing to many governments but it is also a tiresome and difficult goal. For many it may seem the objectives of a profit driven market contradicts the goals of sustainable development. However, others contradict this popular notion and believe certain measures can help deviate a consumer towards a more environmental friendly behavior. Katherine White suggests a SHIFT framework can be used to dissipate the "attitude behavior gap that exists in sustainability contexts". There are an abundant number of factors that affect the behavior of a consumer, the SHIFT framework illustrates a few such as social influence, habit formation feelings, cognition etc. Many companies are prioritizing the sustainable production of goods and services, they consider the negative effects (negative externalities) on the environment. Firms that do not produce in a sustainable manner have been advised to re-think their business model in a way that encourages sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption has been said to yield greater long term profits even though it may increase current costs of production.

The human population continues to grow along with the demand for material goods. Following the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, 2002) and the European Environment Agency (EEA, 2003, 2005) there is continuing concern about nature fragmentation and loss of biodiversity, shortages in freshwater availability, over-fishing of the seas, global warming, extreme weather events, urban air pollution, and environmental noise. The recent UNEP (2005) atlas: "One planet, many people" shows vivid pictures of the way in which human settlements and road infrastructure are proliferating in rapidly urbanizing areas throughout the world. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA, 2005), over the past 50 years human activities have changed vital ecosystem services more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of history. Fifteen out of 24 ecosystem services examined are being degraded or used unsustainably such that they now involve risks of nonlinear changes that will have important consequences for human well-being. Future growing demand for food, water, timber, fiber, and fuel is likely to exacerbate current problems. These problems call for drastic measures, more effective policies that incentivize sustainable consumerism and institutional changes.

## **II. Traditional vs. Sustainable Consumer Buying behavior**

### **Traditional consumption**

Traditional consumer behavior as explained in economics is said to be that of which consumption is done at the lowest possible price and utility (or satisfaction) is maximized. Often, these two reasons fuel any ignorance of the environment from the consumer. Traditional behavior is a "key driver of negative environmental impacts. Consumer behavior differs from person to person according to certain factors such as their situation or location, but their behavior can be generalized and can fall under a specific umbrella. Various factors affect the traditional consumer behavior. Consumers are burdened with needs and wants, needs are goods that are absolutely essential for the consumer and can be difficult to live without while wants are goods that a consumer desire but can live without. Needs such as water, shelter and food are not discussed in sustainable behavior. However, wants, such as cars and bikes are the goods that are discouraged and unappreciated in the eyes of sustainable consumption.

### **Factors Influence On Unsustainable Behavior**

#### **Low prices**

Relatively low prices provide a great incentive for consumers to increase their demand for a particular good. Despite a good having negative external effects on the environment, low prices will become an attractive feature and may take priority for a consumer.

#### **Population**

The population is increasing exponentially; the higher the population, the more consumers in the market and the more consumers in the market, the higher the demand for goods. Firms will produce more and more goods to satisfy the needs and wants of as many people as possible. This increase in the rate of demand and production contribute to the decline in the state of the environment.

#### **Addiction**

Many consumers are addicted to goods that have negative externalities and detrimental effects on the environment. Goods such as tobacco and cigarettes are harmful to the environment, many policies to discourage the consumption of these goods are ineffective because they have an inelastic demand (even high prices cannot prevent a consumer from buying these goods) due to their addictive nature.

#### **Beliefs, attitudes and perception**

Many consumers hold beliefs that may oppose the goals of sustainable consumption. For instance, some consumers do not believe in global warming and therefore consume with a certain ignorance.

#### **Cultural factors**

Cultural factors play a vital role in destructive behavior and often necessitates an unsustainable behavior. Many consumers follow traditions and cultural rituals that require them to consume goods that are harmful to the environment. (The consumption of fireworks is a common example)

#### **Situational and social factors**

Consumers often find themselves with the urge to consume a similar set of goods as the other consumers in their respective society. Consumers have this need to rise in terms of social hierarchy and they believe this rise in social class can be achieved only through the consumption and possession of material goods. These material goods are catastrophic to the environment.

#### **Common pool resources**

Common pool resources (sea-life, forests, etc) are those resources that are non-excludable (cannot exclude a consumer from consuming these goods) and rivalrous (the consumption by one consumer limits the consumption of another). This deadly combination makes the consumption of common pool resources a threat to the environment. Since no price can be charged for the good, the consumers often over consume. This over-consumption can destroy natural habitats and the environment. The factors listed above are only some of the reasons that can explain why consumers generally consume in an unsustainable and anti-environmental manner.

### **Sustainable consumption**

Sustainable consumer behavior has shown an increase in popularity, especially in recent times. By definition, sustainable consumption is the maximizing of quality of life while simultaneously minimizing the use of natural, harmful and toxic resources. The recent trends are rooted to the increasing awareness. Consumers are more aware and have access to a lot more information due to technology, this awareness and information help consumers understand the impacts they have on the environment. This aids them make more educated and environmental friendly decisions and choices in terms of consumption. Additionally, governmental organizations ensure that sustainable development is integrated in their country's policies. These policies and widespread information change a consumers core perspectives and tendencies.

A sustainable model of production has many advantages including an increased efficiency and creativity, increased motivation and retaining of employees, specific benefits from the government (if the

sustainable business has a positive impact on the environment , government are more likely to encourage production and consumption in the form of subsidies and financial grants) , increased innovation and most importantly , possible increasing of profits . Furthermore, consumers will have a more positive perception of the firm which can cause an increase in demand.

"Environmental knowledge leads to a high level of awareness , which , in turn, promotes favorable attitudes towards nature" Environmental knowledge is the basic understanding of environmental issues along with a consumers ability to appreciate , take responsibility and influence the environment. Pro-environmental behavior is fuelled by only a limited amount of factors unlike traditional behavior, it is motivated either by obligation(due to legislations set by the government) or certain emotions. Depending on the emotions and the level of which someone embraces nature , researchers can predict how they tend to behave as a consumer . Due to the constant increase in urbanization , habitats are lost and many a times people are not aware of the significance and the role of nature when it comes to our well-being . The level of exposure to nature determines the level of sustainable consumption.

Different generations view sustainable development in different ways. The baby boom generation consists of people that primarily lived in a time where technology isn't as advanced . Any careers they had were solely and mostly based on machinery. Though this machinery aided in the production process, it also heavily polluted. The concept of global warming and sustainable development is foreign to the "baby boom " generation , these concepts were never introduced to them and till this day many of them refuse to change their consumption pattern because they were never really aware of their impacts . The millennial on the other hand were the first generation to have a childhood with and without the prominence of technology . The internet plays a vital role in their life and due to this reason they are relatively more aware of the effects and impacts they have on the environment. They actively participate and look out for opportunities to make a difference . The millennial generation attempts to change consumption patterns for the better . Finally , we have the generation Z or "gen z" as they are most popularly known as , this generation is "tech savvy" and has never known a life where people were not connected to each other through technology . Being the more technology heavy users , this generation is up to date in terms of relevant information and are often extremely active when it comes to participating in an activity that makes a difference for the environment and the world . Gen Z for example has been one of the only generations to encourage veganism in order to protect and sustain animal life .

Sustainable consumption is quintessential and vital to advance sustainable development . This type of consumption is very much dependant on the values established by the society, the generation and emotions of the consumer and the legislations set by the consumer's respective government.

### **Factors influencing sustainable buying behavior**

Sustainable consumption can be affected by a plethora of factors because it essentially requires consumers to change their "attitude and behavior " . An attitude is the perception of a consumer built over a long period of time and behavior refers to the habitual activities of a consumer , to virtually change these features of a consumer is a demanding task that is decided and regulated by certain factors . These factors , if employed properly , can change a person's consumption pattern and deviate it towards a more sustainable one .

### **SHIFT framework**

Katherine White, Rishab Habib , and David J. Hardisty best described these factors by fabricating a framework called SHIFT that essentially shifts a consumer's consumption pattern.

The SHIFT framework can be explained as one that has 5 distinct themes that a factor can fall under . The SHIFT framework contains and talks about social influence , habit formation ,the individual self , feelings and cognition and Tangibility .Each of these themes can be branched out to many factors.

Social influence can be branched to 3 other factors . Firstly , social norms or what is socially acceptable and approved in a given context can have a powerful influence on sustainable consumption . Recycling is a common example of a social norm and because it is done so often and is a common activity , people are more compelled to conform to these socially approved beliefs . Secondly , the SHIFT framework talks about social identities . This factor talks about the social sub-groups that a consumer lies within . If a consumer is part of a pro-environmental group then he or she also takes upon pro-environmental tasks and activities . Finally , we have social desirability . A consumer takes upon sustainable option if it means that hir or her desirability among others increases or in other words ,to make a positive impression.

Habit formation unlike social influence has many points under it. Habit formation refers to ensuring that consumers repeatedly perform sustainable action . Discontinuity to change bad habits , many consumers find it hard to disrupt a regular and habitual part of life and may be the reason they refuse to consume in a sustainable manner . Penalties on the other hand refers to a punishment to decrease unsustainable activities . A punishment or penalty can be in the form of taxes such as pigouvian or carbon taxes . Another factor that can help shift a consumer's habits would be implementation intentions ( encouraging them to outline the steps

necessary to change their habit) . If they outline the steps necessary then they are more motivated to see it through and follow those steps . Additionally , a strategy to change a consumers habits would be making the process easier and simple to follow . Prompts , being another factor, can encourage pro -environmental behavior by conveying messages to remind the consumer what the "desired sustainable behavior is". Incentives such as discounts , rewards , and gifts can encourage a consumer to adopt certain behavior . This is because consumers look at incentives as return on investment or a reward for investing their time and resources . Rewards have a positive psychological effect on a consumer that makes them crave for more and more(rewards/incentives) . Finally we have feedback , when a consumer is given feedback or specific information regarding their own performance and this feedback is structured in a particular manner then it can potentially help encourage pro-environmental behavior . For example if a consumer has been told he has recycled 40 percent more than last year , he or she will have a satisfaction and desire to improve.

The individual self has a major influence on the consumption behavior . The self concept explains how people take a more defensive stance when someone points out any faults in their behavior . A person is more likely to defend their behavior when someone points out that they consume in an unsustainable manner because they want to view themselves as flawless and in a positive light . Similarly , self consistency refers to people viewing themselves and wanting to be more consistent therefore many people continue to regularly perform any sustainable actions they have undertaken . Self interest is one of the most instrumental and most easily leveraged tools to encourage sustainable consumption . People are more likely to perform an action if it benefits them in any way , therefore this theory suggests that consumers can be manipulated if the benefits of the action is conveyed and elucidated . Self - efficacy is the belief that a consumer will choose a sustainable action if they have high confidence that they will make a difference and if the consumer compromise is relatively low. Lastly , individual differences in features such as concern and agreeableness can be used to predict and encourage sustainable consumption.

Feelings and cognition play a significant role in the decision- taking process of consumers . Pathos (emotion) is a technique often used to infiltrate and change a consumers thought process in terms of making decisions . First we have the negative emotions , these emotions are considered un-appealing when they are used in an intense manner but when they are used in a subtle manner they become powerful tools . Emotions such as fear , guilt and sadness can be used to influence consumers . In contrast , positive emotions can also be used to achieve the same purpose but in a virtually different manner . When a consumer receives "hedonic pleasure" when performing an action , he or she is more inclined towards engaging in that action. Information, learning, and knowledge is another branch of factors that stem from feelings and cognition. Information, learning, and knowledge essentially refers to how the type and understanding of information along with the level of exposure can compel a consumer to perform a certain action and in this case an action that is sustainable . Eco labeling is the use of labels on products to convey and transmit specific information on how consuming the product can benefit the environment . Lastly , the strategic framing of information especially by producers can make a difference in a consumers choice . For example producers can integrate more moral values to the information by using certain phrases .("it is your duty to help the environment").

Tangibility is the last component of the SHIFT framework and is one of the most important ones as well . Tangibility explains a serious problem that consumers tend to have , sustainable requires a consumption requires a consumer to prioritize the interests of others over their own . Sustainable behavior has delayed results in the sense that the affects of the action are only realized in a future time - period . This often leads to a gradual deterioration in a consumer's interest to continue the particular action(consumers want to see immediate results) . The tangibility problem can be potentially solved through a number of factors . If we match temporal focus we avoid or set off tangibility issues . Consumers must shift their focus from the present to the future . In order to achieve this , consumers must be encouraged to look at the bigger picture and think more abstractly . Effectively communicating the local and proximal impacts can make actions seem more desirable . Additionally , concrete communication in terms of conveying the immediate impacts of environmental problems and outlining clear steps to make a difference.

Encouraging the desire for intangibles is a constructive technique to solve the problem of gradual demotivation . If consumers are taught to be less materialistic then there is a high chance of encouraging sustainable behavior . Consumers have a semi-conscious desire to possess materialistic goods , but the problem lies when sustainable actions fail to provide these material goods . An action becomes less and less desirable when less and less material goods are provided as an exchange for the action . The promotion of "dematerialization" is a pivotal solution.

Aside from the factors listed above , an important but overlooked feature is the level of government involvement in encouraging sustainable consumption and discouraging the consumption of demerit goods . Often times , the government uses specific and highly effective tools to achieve their purpose . In terms of sustainable consumption a government may levy a Pigouvian tax to discourage consumption of demerit goods (goods that have a negative impact on the economy) . Pigouvian taxes aim to increase the price of a good and as

the law of demand states that an increase in price leads to a decrease in demand . Another tool is the provision of subsidies in order to encourage the production of goods(lowering the cost of production) and encouraging consumption ( by making costs go down) . Many factors like these affect and influence the level of sustainable consumption in a country as a whole.

### III. ANALYSIS

#### Descriptive statistical analysis

**Table no. 1: Descriptive statistical analysis**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	100	1	2	1.57	.498
Age	100	1	4	2.70	.798
I think it is good to buy sustainable product	100	1	4	2.81	.825
I think it is important to buy sustainable product	100	1	4	2.82	.702
I think it is wise to buy sustainable product	100	1	4	2.70	.745
I pay a lot of attention to my health	100	1	4	2.70	.798
The health aspect is very important in my food choice	100	1	4	2.77	.790
I believe that sustainable product contains more natural protection than normal product making process	100	1	4	2.39	.855
I believe that sustainable product is good for my health than conventional food.	100	1	4	2.41	.954
My knowledge about sustainable product is sufficient	100	1	4	2.81	.825
My knowledge about sustainable product is based on previous experience such as purchasing/consuming/hearing from others/reading about it	100	1	4	2.82	.702
In overall, I have a positive experience/impression about sustainable product	100	1	4	2.72	.729
I pay a lot of attention to the environment	100	1	4	2.70	.798
The environmental aspect is very important in my food choice	100	1	4	2.77	.790
I believe that sustainable product is more environmentally friendly than conventional product	100	1	4	2.39	.855
I feel I should choose sustainable product instead of conventional product	100	1	4	2.78	.910
I get a good conscience about myself if I choose sustainable product	100	1	4	2.80	.853

Based on mean score, Customers are feel sustainable product is important (2.82) and knowledge about sustainable product is based on previous experience such as purchasing/consuming/hearing from others/reading about the product (2.82). Customers are thinking that sustainable products are good (2.81) and r Customers are having sufficient knowledge about sustainable product (2.81).Customers are good conscience when choose sustainable product (2.80) and they feel to choose sustainable product instead of conventional product (2.78).

#### Chi-square Test analysis

Null hypothesis: There is no relationship between age and buy sustainable product

Alternative hypothesis: There is relationship between age and buy sustainable product

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.718 <sup>a</sup>	3	.633
Likelihood Ratio	1.719	3	.633
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.668	1	.197
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 1 cells (12.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.87.

From the table 2 shows that calculated chi-square value is greater than the table value hence Null hypothesis “There is no relationship between age and buy sustainable product” not associated. Thus it clear that is a close significant relationship between age and buying sustainable product.

#### **IV. Discussion**

As customers become older, they start to exhibit different behaviors. Buying motivations, demands, tastes, preferences, and consumption patterns vary widely among customers of all ages. Respondents in this age range are aware and interested in sustainable products in the research location. This study results shows that women are more likely than men to be interested in sustainable product. Possibly because they are concerned and accountable for providing their family and next generation people.

The majority of people have the knowledge on sustainable product. This demonstrates that consumers in the research region are well-versed in the presence of sustainable product. Majority of respondents are purchase sustainable product. Today, individuals are increasingly more aware of their health and what they eat, as shown by this. Sustainable product brands are generally seen favorably by the majority of respondents, mostly owing to the fact that they are chemical-free and promote excellent health.

Consumers' buying habits are changing across the globe as health concerns, environmental issues, and heightened understanding of pesticides used in food production rise to prominence. Consumers are more concerned about the quality of the food/product they eat and use. Through social media, people learn about the dangers of pesticides and chemicals to the environment, social and human health. The high quantities of minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants in product, as well as the lower levels of saturated fat, make people to move sustainable product buying behaviour.

#### **V. Conclusion**

As a consequence of environmental sustainability, the focus shifts from conventional production to sustainable production by using 3 R i.e. Reduce, recycle and reuse. Despite the increased demand for sustainable product, people have limited knowledge on sustainable product. Customers' attitudes and views of sustainable product might be affected by their knowledge of the product and their willingness to purchase it. Sustainable product producers and merchants must take advantage of the shift in consumer attitudes that has occurred in the post COVID-19 era. It has become clearer to consumers that they support sustainable companies. Consumers' behavioural intentions may be encouraged and turned into actual behaviour by using creative communication strategies that promote these positive attitudes.

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