

# Impact of Personal Norms on Green Consumerism in Sri Lanka with the moderating effect of Price Sensitivity - A concept Paper based on Norm Activation Model

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing focus on environmental degradation and the actions to be taken to tackle this challenge, has created surging trend towards embracing green consumerism. Such a reality brings forward the need to understand the functionality of pro-social behaviours such as green consumerism and the barriers that hinder the ability to enable such behaviours. This concept paper is designed as a theory synthesis where an existing theoretical model is applied in the context of green consumerism to study the scenario of personal norms leading towards green consumerism. Moreover, it accommodates the moderation of price sensitivity in converting personal norms into green consumerism in a developing country. Hence, this study brings forward an investigation of literature on the evolution of consumerism and its build-up towards green consumerism, the Norm Activation Model and the price sensitivity of consumers. Through this review, a conceptual model is developed based on the Norm Activation Model to represent the formation of personal norms which lead towards green consumerism as a pro-social initiative. As per the Norm Activation Model, problem awareness which generates an ascription of obligation leads towards creating personal norms which initiate green consumerism. The model is extended to include the moderating role of price sensitivity in leading personal norms towards green consumerism as price sensitivity was identified in empirical studies to be a prominent factor among the consumers of developing countries. Through the application of this model, it is expected to address the problem of price sensitivity in developing countries being a barrier towards green consumerism through the discernment of the instigation of personal norms.

**Keywords: Personal norms, green consumerism, price sensitivity, norm activation model**

## INTRODUCTION

In an era that is defined by environmental problems and the pursuit for sustainability, the phenomenon of green consumerism has emerged as a salient trend in consumer behaviour worldwide. This concept paper looks closely at the role that personal norms and price sensitivity play in the complex processes that underlie green consumerism. This study, which is based on the Norm Activation Model (NAM), aims to understand how personal norms, influenced by problem awareness and ascription of obligation, affect green consumerism. It

also seeks to learn more about how price sensitivity affects the link between personal norms and green consumer behaviour. The groundwork for an in-depth investigation into these crucial facets of sustainable consumption is set forth in this study.

An analysis of empirical studies led towards the identification that personal norms are not always converted to pro-social initiatives (Shwartz, 1977; Sharma et al., 2022). In addition, it is highlighted that price sensitivity is a prominent feature among consumers in developing countries (Suanin, 2020), and that price sensitivity functions as a barrier towards actuating sustainable behaviours (Sheoran & Kumar, 2020). However, although personal norms have been a major focus of study on green consumerism, there is a noticeable gap in understanding the barriers to pro-social behaviours (Fauzi et al., 2022; Sheoran & Kumar, 2020). For consumer behaviour and marketing strategies in emerging economies, it is crucial to understand how price sensitivity moderates the relationship between personal norms and green consumerism. The importance of personal norms in influencing pro-environmental decisions has been extensively researched (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Schwartz, 1977). Personal norms serve as internalized standards influencing ethical and sustainable decisions. These norms are shaped by problem awareness (acknowledging environmental difficulties) and the ascription of obligation (feeling responsible for fixing these issues) (Stern et al., 1999). According to empirical evidence, people with higher personal norms are more likely to engage in green consumerism, which includes actions such as purchasing eco-friendly products and implementing environmentally friendly practices (Thøgersen, 2006).

Through this research we aim to identify the impact of problem awareness and ascription of obligation as preceding variables of personal norms on green consumerism. Additionally, this study aims towards identifying the impact that price sensitivity has on the relationship between personal norms and green consumerism. Hence, this study theoretically addresses the problem of high price sensitivity demonstrated by consumers who aware of the requirement to adopt environmentally friendly consumption behaviours and consider themselves to have a responsibility to adopt green consumerism. In addressing this problem, this study brings forward the four questions;

- What is the impact of problem awareness on the ascription of responsibility to undertake green consumerism?
- What is the impact of the ascription of responsibility on the personal norms leading towards the adoption of green consumerism?
- What is the impact of personal norms on the adoption of green consumerism?

- What is the moderating impact of price sensitivity on the relationship between personal norms and green consumerism?

The backdrop of Sri Lanka, a developing country where customers frequently display high degrees of price sensitivity, has particular relevance for this study. In Sri Lanka, the majority of people look for value for money when making purchases, thus it's critical to comprehend how personal norms and price sensitivity interact (Sheoran & Kumar, 2020; Indrani et al., 2020) This study is gainful to policymakers, entrepreneurs, and marketers in building strategies that successfully promote green consumption while taking into account the economic realities of a developing country by offering light on these dynamics in the Sri Lankan context. In addition, promoting sustainable consumption patterns in developing nations like Sri Lanka is essential for the world's attempts to move toward a future with less impact on the environment.

The paper is organized into four sections as follows. To establish a solid theoretical foundation, we first performed a thorough analysis of the existing literature on consumerism, norm activation model and price sensitivity. It is followed by the formulation of hypotheses and the conceptual framework. Then, the proposed methodology for the study is discussed. Thereafter, the theoretical, managerial, and socio-economic implications are explained, together with paths for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

### **Consumerism and Green Consumerism**

The concept of consumerism has been a topic of debate among scholars for several decades as the concept has been addressed through various perspectives thereby creating different branches of consumerism as well as evolving definitions of the concept itself. Based on an analysis of the empirical literature available, the original definition by Vance Packard was highlighted by Soriano & Slater (2009), claim that consumerism is perceived as a strategy that is applied to encourage customers to generate needs and wants that would result in excessive purchasing behaviors fueled through advertising and promotions. As such, researchers continued to criticize the use of advertising to manipulate consumers into purchasing unnecessary products (Ali & Wisniesk, 2010; Abela, 2006; Sharma, 2020).

Subsequently, the definition of consumerism moved towards an interpretation of a social movement against consumer exploitation (Soriano & Slater, 2009). Thereafter, consumerism was considered to be an effort made towards improving the living environment of consumers' in consideration of the sellers' and consumers rights (Soriano & Slater, 2009; Varadarajan &

Thirunarayana, 1990). However, with Peter Drucker's statement which emphasizes that the essence of marketing is to provide products that enhance the consumer satisfaction by addressing the consumers' needs and wants, a novel era was established for consumerism (Soriano & Slater, 2009). Therefore, the concept of "Consumer is King" was developed.

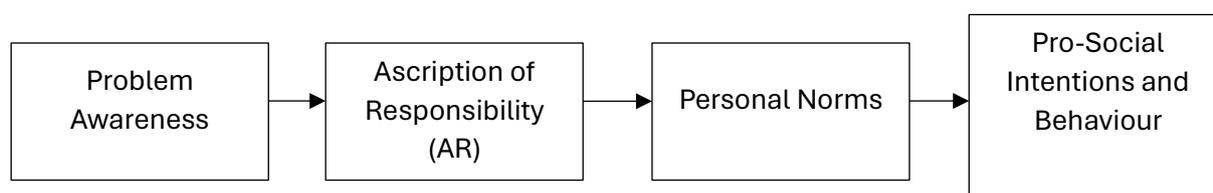
Thereafter, consumerism was considered as the doctrine that represented consumption to be a factor that led to happiness and satisfaction achieved through the receipt of products that allude to the consumers' needs (Soriano & Slater, 2009). Stemming from this, consumerism developed towards a concept that referred to the individualism of consumers and a consumption trend that represented the consumer identities and personalities (Ali & Wisniesk, 2010; Djafarova & Fouts, 2021). Hence, the current reference of consumerism is far-fetched from the initial reference of the concept.

Stemming from such developments, the concept of green consumerism is defined as environmental activism that represents the political self (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002). Furthermore, the consumers' environmental attitudes are considered to have an impact on environmental consumerism whereas consumers who are open to recycling and other environmental practices are more willing to pay for environmentally friendly products (Gupta & Ogden, 2009). As consumerism has moved towards adapting to green concepts, businesses and marketers have also initiated strategies that address these requirements of customers to attract and retain customers through building a green reputation (Riva et al., 2021). Green consumerism is explicitly referred to as environmentally friendly consumer behavior as it is a behavior that is generated through a sense of social responsibility (Jaiswal et al., 2020). Hence, despite the initial representation of consumerism, the current form of green consumerism refers to consumers who are concerned for the environment.

### **Norm Activation Model**

Stemming from the objective of studying the scepticism towards the motivation to engage in voluntary services, Schwartz (1977) designed the norm activation model. As such, the basis was laid for the identification of the internal sources of altruistic motivation which activates the responses of individuals during an emergency or other important situations (Sharma et al., 2022). Hence, Schwartz (1977) identified that the activation of emotions, generation of social expectations as well as self-expectations are several factors which generates the initiative to engage in voluntary activities for the societies' benefit. Throughout the years, the focus of empirical studies in understanding the eco-friendly behaviour of individuals has led towards

the vast application of the Norm Activation Model (Kautish, 2020; Sharma et al., 2022). Therefore, this model is selected for this study as well.



*Source:* Steg & Groot (2010).

### Figure 1: Norm Activation Model

As the original Norm Activation Model was not presented with a graphical model depicting the relationships, there have been various interpretations of the theory. Steg & Groot (2010), have analyzed these representations of the theory and presented a model which demonstrates the relationships addressed in the Norm Activation Model by Schwartz (1977), by analytically testing the two most prominent models available in the literature. As per the findings of Steg & Groot (2010), the model presented in Figure 1 has the most promising representation of the variables identified in the Norm Activation Model.

#### Problem Awareness

It has been identified that consumers are made aware of social issues such as global warming, carbon pollution and the contribution that consumption makes towards the creation of such issues (Kautish et al., 2020). As per Schwartz (1977), once the problem has been identified by an individual a sense of guilt that they are responsible for taking action in unfavourable social circumstances such as social emergencies, natural disasters, and in this instance, globally identified environmental issues. For instance, Huda et al. (2018), highlight that learnings focusing on the enhancement of awareness regarding the requirement to adopt social responsibility and envision sustainability encourages actions and collaborations through the ascription of responsibility. Furthermore, in a study that analyses the barriers to the adoption of social responsibility accounting which would benefit the social and environmental performance, Khodamipour et al. (2023), state that the lack of public awareness is a main barrier to its implementation. The research by Dalvi-Esfahani et al. (2017), emphasize that the awareness of the consequences of adopting green behaviours has an impact of the intention to adopt such behaviours.

Moreover, research confirms this relationship as consciousness and awareness about an issue creates a need within a consumer to take necessary actions and adopt the required consumption behaviours (Kautish et al., 2020; Fauzi et al., 2022). As discussed previously, the concept of consumerism evolved to its current application in green consumerism as consumers were made aware of the environmental issues and the need to adopt consumption behaviours which minimize the damage to the environment (Riva et al., 2021). Therefore, as per the Norm Activation Model, it is suggested that,

*Hypotheses 1:* The awareness of environmental problems has a significant impact on the ascription of responsibility towards green consumerism.

### **Ascription of Responsibility**

From identifying that there is an obligation towards society and that they are able to assist in solving the issue, a sense of responsibility is triggered (Schwartz, 1977). This sense of responsibility is of two types whereas the individual may consider that they are capable of taking action to solve an issue and alternatively, because they feel responsible for creating the unfavorable situation and is motivated to make corrective measures (Schwartz, 1977). Additionally, a feeling of accountability, distinctive suitability to take action due to the possession of required skills or the appeal of drawing attention to the need and setting an example of the expected social behavior (Schwartz, 1977; John et al., 2021). Furthermore, in a study that explores the willingness of individuals to comply with certain requirements, Yazdanmehr and Wang (2017), state that the sense of responsibility heightens the personal norms held regarding the said behaviour. In studying the stockpiling behaviour of consumers during crises Elhoushy & Ribeiro (2023), mention that the sense of responsibility for the consequences of such behaviours results in activating the personal norms that lead towards responsible consumption behaviours. Moreover, Duong (2023), states that the ascription of responsibility is an internal stimulus that activates the personal norms towards adopting sustainable behaviours such as energy-saving behaviours.

Therefore, if a consumer feels responsible for the damage caused to the environment due to their consumption activities, then they are likely to take necessary initiatives (John et al., 2021). Hence, based on the Norm Activation Model it is suggested that,

*Hypothesis 2:* The ascription of responsibility toward green consumerism has a significant impact on personal norms.

## Personal Norms

As a consumer is made aware of an issue, it is more likely to lead towards stimulating their personal norms (Choi et al., 2015). Movement through the identification of an issue and the generation of a sense of responsibility activates a sense of moral obligation which thereafter builds towards a situational norm (Schwartz, 1977; Fauzi et al., 2022). These personal norms were discovered to be connected to altruistic behaviour such as the initiatives taken to reduce environmental pollution (Schwartz, 1977).

Empirical studies have identified norms to be one of the main predictors along with awareness in deciding behaviours as it shapes the perception of whether the behaviour would be satisfactory or unsatisfactory (Afroz et al., 2020). The findings by Wang & Chou (2020), suggest that personal norms have a direct impact on the attitudes that consumers hold towards the adoption of the purchase of fair-trade products. In comparing sustainable and apathetic consumers, it was discovered that the personal norms are at significantly higher levels for sustainable consumers (Park & Ha, 2011). Furthermore, personal norms play a significant moderating role in encouraging pro-environmental behaviours which are promoted through various advertisements (Jahari et al., 2022).

Hence, awareness, responsibility and personal norms have been identified as precedents which lead toward pro-social intentions and similar green consumption behaviours (Fauzi et al., 2022). It has been identified that green consumerism is a behaviour that arises with a sense of social responsibility within the consumer (Jaiswal, 2020). Therefore, as per the Norm Activation Model, it is suggested that,

*Hypothesis 3: Personal norms regarding pro-social intentions have a significant impact on green consumerism.*

## Price Sensitivity

Price has always been considered a sensitive subject among consumers as it is a significant factor that is considered when implementing a purchasing decision (Li et al., 2016; Bhutto et al., 2020). In a study by Sheoran & Kumar (2020), price sensitivity is identified as the leading barrier to sustainable behavior followed by lack of awareness, perceived social image, no sustainable practices among friends and family, unavailability, greenwashing, perception of no environmental impact and incompatibility with consumer needs.

Price sensitivity has been addressed in literature as a variable which is capable of affecting the consumers attitude towards the product as well as the personal and subjective norms towards

green consumption (Hassan et al., 2018; Moser, 2016). Adding to this is the high level of price sensitivity among the consumers of developing and under developed countries (Suanin, 2020). This is further proven through a study by the Boston Consulting Group which presented that there is a high price sensitivity for a majority of products from developing countries such as India when compared with countries such as Japan, France and Germany (Witschi et al., 2021). In explaining the Norm Activation Model, it was identified that people tend to balance the costs of a moral action and its benefit, and thereafter if the costs are high, they would redefine the situation so as to neutralize their personal norms (Schwartz, 1977). This factor was evident in recent studies as research has identified goal-oriented and compulsive consumption behaviours or task-oriented and impulsive behaviour would lead towards enabling consumption behaviours (Kautish et al., 2020) and if these motivators are not powerful to change the traditional behaviours, then it may lead to neutralize any perceptions of adopting eco-friendly behaviours (Sharma et al., 2022). Therefore, this is an area which is in need of further study to confirm the affirmations which may impact the personal norms which are decidedly expected to impact consumer behaviours.

Henceforth, price sensitivity can be considered as a determinant of green purchasing behaviour and therefore green consumerism. If consumers deem the prices to be a restricting factor when engaging in green consumerism in terms of receiving value for money, then it is likely to discourage consumption even though the personal norms suggest that consumers have a responsibility towards the environment (Moser, 2016). However, consumers are willing to pay a premium price considering the fact that they have a strong sense of responsibility toward social and environmental well-being (Parsa et al., 2015). Even so, literature suggests that based on the context of the market the price sensitivity towards green consumption can differ whereas emerging markets are more likely to have high price sensitivity when developing green purchasing intentions (Bhutto et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the relationship between personal norms and pro-social behaviors of the Norm Activation Model and the literature on price sensitivity, it is suggested that,

*Hypotheses 4: Price sensitivity moderates the relationship between personal norms and green consumerism.*

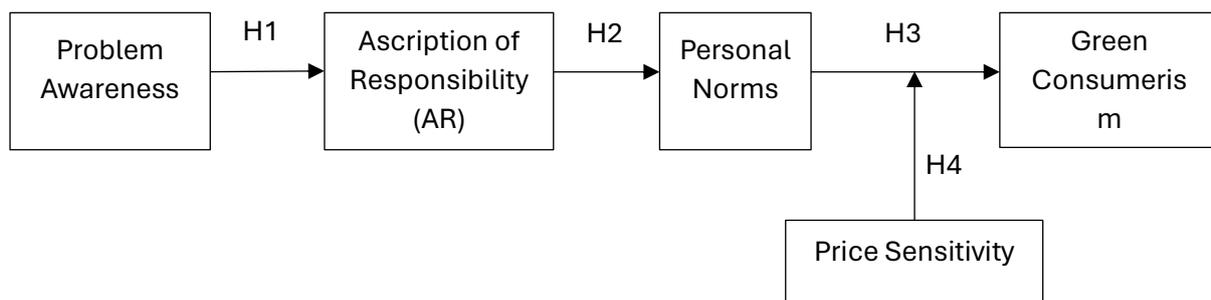
## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The pro-social behaviours and antecedents which lead to such behaviours are explained through the Norm Activation Model (Shwartz, 1977; Kautish et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2022;

Fauzi et al., 2022). As per this model, the awareness regarding a problem raises a sense of responsibility which develops personal norms that decide the pro-social intentions and behaviours of individuals (Shwartz, 1977; Steg & Groot, 2010). Hence, based on this model the conceptual framework is developed for this study to explore the impact of problem awareness on creating responsibility which leads towards personal norms that result in green consumerism as demonstrated in Figure 2.

Moreover, as it was identified that individuals are likely to evade the pro-social actions developed through personal norms, this study has accommodated a price sensitivity which is considered to be a factor of importance that has been the subject of argument among researchers (Moser, 2015; Parsa et al., 2015; Bhutto et al., 2020). The literature identified that personal norms are required to be strong to overcome the barriers which may hinder the ability of an individual to engage in pro-social behaviours (Shwartz, 1977; Kautish et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2022). As price sensitivity is a main consideration when making a purchase and because the study is undertaken in the context of a global inflationary situation (IMF, 2023), this study takes into consideration the moderating impact of price sensitivity.

Therefore, the conceptual framework demonstrated in Figure 2 for this study explores the impact that problem awareness would have on the ascription of responsibility towards environmental protection which develops personal norms leading towards green consumerism. Thereafter, the model is expanded to adopt the price sensitivity of consumers which would impact the relationship between personal norms and green consumerism.



**Figure 2: Proposed Conceptual Framework**

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper takes into consideration a Norm Activation Model designed based on the original theory and has been tested previously. However, as the model is a novel design and there are

various models of norm activation applied throughout the literature, this study contributes to existing literature by confirming its validity and applicability.

Furthermore, this paper suggests testing the moderating impact of price sensitivity on the relationship between personal norms and green consumerism, which would test the notion that the actionability of personal norms can be disrupted by various factors. Hence, the Norm Activation Model is extended to include price sensitivity in moderating the execution of green consumerism.

The Norm Activation Model studies the pre-sets of pro-social behaviours and suggests several antecedents to such behaviour. The model is applied in this study under the context of green consumerism as it is considered to be a pro-social behaviour. Moreover, the knowledge of pro-social behaviours such as green consumerism in developing countries is limited in the available empirical literature. Hence, this study would generate insight from the context of green consumerism in a developing country.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The present research takes into consideration the cues that leads towards green consumerism in the form of problem awareness, ascription of obligations and personal norms. Each of these variables are considered to play a role in the decision-making process of customers who move towards adopting green consumerism. Hence, the findings of this research would provide knowledge on the realities of the path towards green consumerism which is a significant trend in the current market.

As the research addresses the cues to green consumerism, a deeper understanding of which areas to be prioritized when promoting green products and practices. For instance, when strategizing promotional campaigns, the managers would be able to better understand whether to raise awareness of the environmental problems, highlight the obligations of consumers towards the environment or promote various environmentally friendly behaviours addressing personal norms.

Moreover, as various groups of consumers are considered to have different responses towards price sensitivity, the findings of this study will contribute to businesses in clearly understanding the price sensitivity of consumer groups from developing countries. furthermore, as the available knowledge on the presence of green consumerism in developing countries is limited, the findings of this study will contribute to understanding the pricing strategies to be undertaken for these consumer segments.

Finally, this study is applicable in understanding the concept of green consumerism and its presence in developing countries as well as in strategizing the actions that need to be taken to address the demands of green consumerism in developing countries.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS**

In the current context, detrimental environmental disasters have become the focus of the states, firms as well as the society as a whole. Subsequently, state policies are designed and there are various organizations as well as social movements which attempt to take necessary actions to overcome these environmental challenges. Emanating from environmental disasters, events such as natural disasters, the increased spread of illnesses and the rise of pandemics such as Covid-19, changes in weather patterns and extreme weather conditions have not only demonstrated changes in the environment, but also caused changes in the functioning of economies as well as lifestyles of the modern society. Hence, more and more consumers are aware of the need to adopt environmentally friendly consumption behaviours leading to trends such as green consumerism. These factors lead to the need for economic actors to understand the concept of green consumerism in-depth so as to address the changes in consumption patterns and the need to update the current policies and economic transactions to accommodate the new trend in consumption.

This study presents the necessary understanding of green consumerism in addressing the factors that lead to green consumerism. Moreover, the study on green consumerism is provided based on the context of a developing country as it allows for the developing states to understand the policies that need to be brought forward to suit the current market structure. As developing countries are making an effort to align with the global environmental goals for the future period such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), this study will present the pre-sets that need to be addressed. Hence, the insight on the price sensitivity to identify whether it's a barrier to the movement towards a green economy of a Developing country can be discerned through this study.

## **AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As a concept paper, the model presented in this study has not been tested and therefore it is recommended for this model to be tested to generate factful findings on green consumerism and price sensitivity. Furthermore, as the level of green consumerism is likely to differ among

various types of products and industries such as organic production industries, fashion industry, tourism and hospitality industry, it is recommended for future studies to be undertaken separately for such industries. Moreover, this model can be tested in different contexts such as the context of developed countries and among different generations to identify whether there are differences among the norm activation for green consumerism and whether there are other unique barriers to the execution of such norms. This model can be further enhanced and expanded through combining with other theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Norm-Value Model, Social Identity Theory etc. in order to study the pro-social behaviors in-depth. Lastly, the applicability of modern marketing techniques in encouraging green consumerism can be tested through accommodating the Source Credibility Model to the Norm Activation Model.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident based on empirical literature that green consumerism has risen over the past decade and the driving force of green consumerism has been the increased intensity of environmental catastrophes. This has brought the attention of scholars and practitioners alike towards the study of green consumerism. However, the functionality of green consumerism is understood to be varying between countries even though it is promoted as a pro-social initiative to protect the environment from the negative impact of consumption behaviours. As a theory synthesis, this paper presents a conceptual framework which can be applied to study the variables preceding green consumerism drawn from the perspective of Norm Activation Model. Moreover, as literature presents the high price sensitivity of consumers from developing countries, this variable is accommodated in the conceptual model to be studied as a disruptor of the personal norms to adopt green consumerism. Hence, this paper sets the path towards studying green consumerism in the context of a developing country and generates significant contributions for literature on green consumerism from the context of a developing country, which can be applied by practitioners for promotional purposes and strategy development.

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