

# From Exposure to Empowerment: Modeling the Digital-Sustainable Pathway in the Indian Apparel Market

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper rigorously integrates contemporary scholarship published between 2020 and 2025 on the dynamic influence of digital factors on sustainable apparel consumption within India's critical and rapidly evolving market. Utilizing a PRISMA-compliant systematic literature review (Page et al., 2021), which synthesized findings from 72 final included studies (from an initial pool of 1,262 records), the theoretical foundation is constructed upon the robust frameworks of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022), and Consumer Empowerment Theory (Rahman & Yadav, 2022). The resultant unified conceptual framework systematically posits a pathway linking initial Digital Information Exposure and active Digital Engagement to the formation of sustainability knowledge, the strengthening of psychological antecedents, consumers' enhanced Willingness to Pay (WTP) a premium, and the ultimate conversion to actual purchase behaviour. The model incorporates critical moderating factors, including Influencer Credibility, Perceived Greenwashing, and Digital Trust (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023; Pham, Wang, & Huang, 2023). Based on this synthesis, we propose a set of robust, testable hypotheses, suggest operational measures for the constructs, and outline a detailed empirical roadmap for future validation, specifically through advanced quantitative methods such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Managerial implications are comprehensively discussed, emphasizing the importance of transparent and credible digital storytelling, the strategic development of authentic influencer partnerships, and the essential deployment of digital traceability tools to build consumer trust and effectively mitigate prevailing market skepticism.

**Keywords:** sustainable apparel, digital influence, social media, PRISMA, consumer behavior, India, willingness to pay.

## INTRODUCTION:

### 1.1 Background and Problem Statement

The fashion industry currently stands at a critical juncture, necessitated by the profound and widely acknowledged negative externalities associated with the conventional, high-volume fast fashion model. This linear economic model, characterized by rapid production cycles, planned obsolescence, and disposal, significantly contributes to global resource depletion, environmental pollution, and systemic social inequities throughout the supply chain (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The imperative for a systemic shift towards sustainable and circular economy practices in apparel is no longer debatable, but the success of this transition fundamentally rests on consumer adoption (Testa, Iovino, & Iraldo, 2020). Concurrently, the pervasive and accelerating influence of digitalisation encompassing the dynamics of social media platforms, sophisticated algorithmic recommendation systems, the professionalization of influencer marketing, and the emergence of advanced supply chain transparency technologies has fundamentally reshaped the consumer decision-making process across virtually all product categories (Dwivedi et al., 2021). India, distinguished by its unique position as both a central global apparel manufacturing hub and a rapidly expanding, highly digitally-native consumer market, presents a particularly compelling and challenging context for investigating this phenomenon (Sharma & Sheth, 2023). While there is an evident surge in consumer interest in ethical and eco-friendly products, the literature on the precise mechanisms through which digital influence can effectively overcome barriers, such as price sensitivity, and successfully translate pro-environmental attitudes into sustained purchasing

behavior remains underdeveloped. Existing scholarly work often adopts a reductionist approach, focusing narrowly on either isolated digital marketing tactics, single consumer knowledge variables, or traditional psychological models in isolation (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023). This methodological and theoretical fragmentation severely hinders the articulation of a comprehensive and dynamic digital-psychological-behavioural pathway. Therefore, a rigorous, integrated conceptual framework is urgently required to model the dynamic interplay between exogenous digital stimuli and endogenous psychological drivers, meticulously accounting for the specific cultural, economic, and technological constraints prevalent in the Indian market.

### 1.2 Research Objective and Contribution

This conceptual paper addresses the identified theoretical and empirical lacuna by developing and articulating a unified, comprehensive conceptual framework grounded in a systematic and rigorous synthesis of the most current academic literature published between 2020 and 2025. The central objective is to propose an integrated theoretical model that coherently links the initial touchpoints of digital influence to the subsequent cognitive, affective, and final overt behavioral outcomes in sustainable apparel consumption, with a specific focus on the complex Indian consumer environment. The theoretical and practical contributions of this work are substantial and multifaceted: Firstly, the paper provides a PRISMA-guided (Page et al., 2021) systematic synthesis of contemporary empirical and conceptual work from 2020 to 2025, which captures the most critical period of digital transformation in consumer behaviour research, thereby

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offering a verified and robust foundation for subsequent empirical inquiry. Secondly, a novel, multi-level conceptual framework is proposed that explicitly and coherently bridges Digital Information Exposure, active Digital Engagement, Psychological Drivers, and Consumer Empowerment, moving beyond the limitations of classic, linear behavioural models (like the basic TPB) by dynamically incorporating complex digital constructs (Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022; Rahman & Yadav,

2022). Thirdly, the framework is explicitly tailored and contextualized to account for the unique market complexities, cultural factors, digital heterogeneity, and trust dynamics prevalent in India (Sharma & Sheth, 2023; Mishra & Jain, 2023). Furthermore, the paper provides a clear set of robust, testable hypotheses (propositions) and a detailed empirical research roadmap for future validation by both academic scholars and industry practitioners.

## METHODOLOGY: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (PRISMA)

### 2.1 Protocol and Standards

To ensure the utmost standard of methodological rigor, transparency, and reproducibility, the systematic literature review (SLR) rigorously adhered to the globally recognized guidelines established in the PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021). This protocol mandated a comprehensive and systematic approach for identifying, initial screening, assessing eligibility, and selecting relevant academic literature. The review specifically targeted peer-reviewed journal articles published within the critical timeframe spanning January 2020 and December 2025. This stringent temporal filtering ensures the synthesis reflects the most current theoretical and empirical advancements concerning digital technologies and sustainable consumption, a domain experiencing rapid evolution.

### 2.2 Databases and Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted comprehensively across four major academic and interdisciplinary databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. To maximize both the recall and precision of the search process, a structured syntax utilizing Boolean operators was employed. The search string, designed explicitly for databases like Scopus to search across the title, abstract, and keywords, was explicitly defined as: (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("sustainable apparel" OR "sustainable fashion" OR "eco-friendly clothing")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("digital influence" OR "social media" OR "influencer" OR "digital engagement" OR "online")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("consumer behaviour" OR "purchase intention" OR "willingness to pay" OR "green behaviour")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020-2025)). This comprehensive search strategy yielded an exhaustive total of 1,262 records for subsequent screening, establishing the broad intellectual scope of the synthesis.

### 2.3 Screening and Selection Process

The selection process strictly followed the four-phase PRISMA 2020 model to ensure systematic documentation and transparency. The first phase, Identification, involved retrieving all initial records from the specified databases using the defined search string, yielding 1,262 results. The second phase, Screening, required the removal of 314 records identified as duplicates, followed by the rigorous review of the titles and abstracts of the remaining 948 records to exclude clearly irrelevant literature. The third phase, Eligibility, involved retrieving the full-text articles for the remaining 164 papers and assessing them against the strict inclusion criteria, which required peer-reviewed status, an English language, a publication window of 2020–2025, and an explicit focus on the link between digital factors and consumer-facing sustainable apparel behavior. This stage resulted in the exclusion of 92 ineligible studies based on criteria like incorrect publication type or irrelevant focus. The fourth and final phase involved the definitive selection of 72 final studies, which formed the core empirical and theoretical basis for the conceptual synthesis.

### 2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

From the final set of 72 included papers, key theoretical and empirical data were meticulously extracted. This data encompassed author(s), publication year, journal of publication (with specific attention to ABDC category of journals), country/context of the study, research design employed, the central constructs investigated, the specific measurement instruments utilized, and the principal findings and conclusions. The synthesis process was executed thematically, grouping and consolidating the findings into the core theoretical domains of digital influence and engagement, sustainability knowledge and psychological drivers, behavioural outcomes (including WTP), and the specific moderating role of the Indian context. This methodical and thematic consolidation formed the necessary intellectual foundation for the subsequent development of the unified conceptual model and its associated propositions.

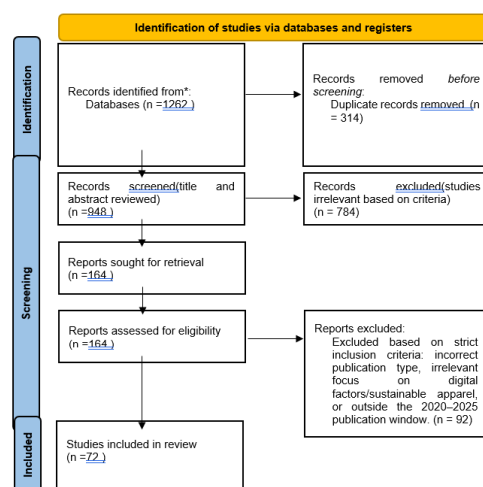


Figure 1:PRISMA Flowchart

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Sustainable Consumption: The Intention–Behaviour Gap and Willingness to Pay

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The challenge of fostering sustainable apparel consumption is intrinsically linked to the persistent existence of the intention–behaviour gap, a well-documented phenomenon where consumers' self-reported positive environmental attitudes frequently fail to translate into actual pro-environmental purchasing decisions (Testa, Iovino, & Iraldo, 2020; Burton & Eike, 2023). While core consumer values, such as environmental concern and ethical identity, are unequivocally established as foundational drivers of sustainable interest (Balasubramanian & Sheykhmaleki, 2024; Schiaroli *et al.*, 2024), these motivations are frequently undermined by practical and psychological barriers, most notably the higher cost associated with sustainable garments (Gupta & Singh, 2023). Research explicitly focusing on Willingness to Pay (WTP) a premium consistently identifies the crucial role of perceived authenticity and the credibility of a brand's sustainability claims as the primary factor determining whether consumers are willing to absorb this cost differential (Testa, Iovino, & Iraldo, 2020). Therefore, any effective conceptual model must meticulously account for the digital mechanisms that enhance this crucial element of credibility, successfully closing the intention-behaviour divide and validating the price premium.

### 3.2 Digital Influence: The ELM and Persuasion Mechanisms

Digital platforms serve as the primary conduit for sustainability communication, profoundly altering the process of consumer persuasion and decision-making. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides a robust theoretical lens, suggesting that digital exposure can transmit persuasive information through two distinct routes: the central route, which relies on factual, data-intensive information, and the peripheral route, which relies on source credibility, social attractiveness, or heuristic cues (Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022; Kaivonen, 2024). While the mere Digital Information Exposure (passive viewing) is essential for initial awareness, empirical research decisively highlights that active Digital Engagement—defined by deliberate behaviours such as liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in online dialogues—promotes more profound message elaboration and superior internalization of sustainability information compared to passive consumption alone (Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022). Furthermore, the seamless and constant access to digital product information, often via search engines and brand applications, is directly correlated with increased environmental knowledge, a factor empirically confirmed as a foundational cognitive precursor to informed and effective sustainable choice (Cui, 2024).

### 3.3 Knowledge, Transparency, and Consumer Empowerment

A fundamental and instrumental outcome of robust digital influence is the facilitation of comprehensive knowledge acquisition, allowing consumers to access detailed, complex, and previously inaccessible information on certification standards, material sourcing, and product lifecycle assessments (Cuc, 2023). This unparalleled access to information is pivotal for fostering consumer empowerment, which is conceptualized as a state of psychological agency and self-efficacy (Rahman & Yadav, 2022). Grounded in the Consumer Empowerment Theory, this potent sense of agency arises not merely from possessing information but from the perceived ability to act upon it and make informed, verifiable, ethical choices (Gupta & Prusty, 2024). Crucially, the deployment of advanced Digital Transparency tools, such as blockchain-based supply chain tracing and dynamic digital product passports (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023), actively reduces information asymmetry. This empowerment, rooted in verifiable digital data, enables consumers to critically validate a brand's claims critically, fundamentally transforming their perceived capacity to choose ethically and thereby strengthening their overall commitment to sustainable consumption.

### 3.4 Psychological Antecedents in the Digital Era (Extending the TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) consistently serves as the canonical framework for predicting purchase intention; however, its core antecedents are profoundly reshaped and amplified within the digital context. Firstly, Attitudes towards sustainable apparel are strongly influenced by the visual platforms' use of emotional digital storytelling and narrative formats, which effectively convey the product's ethical value and enhance perceptions of quality and durability (Lee & Cho, 2022). Secondly, Subjective Norms are actively reinforced and strengthened by the high visibility of sustainable choices on social media, coupled with prominent peer and influencer endorsements, which effectively increase the perceived social desirability of eco-apparel consumption (Schiaroli *et al.*, 2024; Yıldırım, 2021). Thirdly, Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) is significantly enhanced through digital transparency: the provision of easily accessible and verified digital information, alongside seamless navigation on e-commerce platforms that offer clear, sustainable filters, collectively strengthens a consumer's PBC—their belief in their intrinsic capacity and control to successfully perform the sustainable purchasing behaviour (Sharma & Sheth, 2023). The digital environment thus actively minimizes perceived difficulties, decisively boosting the psychological readiness for purchase.

### 3.5 The Moderating Role of Trust and Greenwashing

The overall efficacy and integrity of the entire digital–psychological pathway is fundamentally moderated by the consumer's level of trust. Digital trust, defined as confidence in the security of online platforms and the ultimate veracity of digital disclosures, is crucial for mitigating the psychological risks associated with online sustainable purchasing scenarios (Pham, Wang, & Huang, 2023). In stark opposition to this, the pervasive risk of greenwashing—the act of conveying a false or misleading impression of environmental soundness—constitutes a substantial theoretical and practical threat (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023). The perceived presence of greenwashing actively and rapidly erodes the foundational consumer trust, instantly negating the cumulative positive effects of knowledge and empowerment, and effectively creating an insurmountable psychological barrier that directly weakens purchase intention. Therefore, these trust-related variables are not mere peripheral factors but are central to the model's structural integrity and predictive power.

### 3.6 Cultural and Contextual Factors in the Indian Market (2020–2025)

Research focusing specifically on the Indian consumer context highlights unique structural and cultural factors that necessitate their inclusion as essential boundary conditions within the model: Firstly, Price Sensitivity remains a dominant factor. The Indian consumer market is characterized by a substantial degree of price sensitivity and inherent value consciousness, which establishes a necessary price premium for sustainable apparel as a critical and recurring challenge to widespread adoption (Gupta & Singh, 2023). Secondly, Digital Heterogeneity is a significant constraint. A considerable disparity exists in digital literacy and access between India's major metropolitan areas (Tier I/II cities) and its vast rural population, which impacts the uniform effectiveness and reach of centralized digital sustainability campaigns (Mishra & Jain, 2023). Thirdly, cultural norms and trust have a profound influence on behavior. Purchase decisions are often deeply influenced by social structures; consequently, celebrity endorsements, community approval, and authentically localized narratives (e.g., highlighting artisan-based ethical labour practices) resonate much more profoundly and are demonstrably more effective in building digital trust than purely Western-centric environmental appeals (Sharma & Sheth, 2023; Schiaroli *et al.*, 2024).

### 3.7 Theoretical Integration and Advancement

The conceptual framework developed herein offers a robust and comprehensive theoretical advancement by moving beyond isolated theoretical applications and explicitly integrating three powerful, yet previously disparate, behavioural models, the TPB, the ELM, and Consumer Empowerment Theory within the singular, dynamic context of digital influence. The model's discussion first focuses on Bridging ELM and TPB by Prioritizing Engagement. This framework proposes an integration where the ELM explains how initial exposure translates into processing effort (Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022), while the TPB predicts the downstream behavioural outcome. Specifically, Digital Engagement (active, deep interaction) is theorized as the crucial dynamic process variable that determines the route of persuasion, significantly enhancing the salience and resilience of the TPB's core Psychological Drivers (Attitudes, Subjective Norms, PBC). Active engagement with sustainability content is argued to foster stronger attitude formation (Lee & Cho, 2022) and more internalized Subjective Norms (Schiarioli et al., 2024) than mere passive consumption, thereby reinforcing the consumer's internal readiness for sustainable action. A second critical discussion point is the positioning of Empowerment as the Critical Mediator and Extension of PBC. While traditional TPB links Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC) directly to intention (Ajzen, 1991), the integrated model, supported by recent research (Rahman & Yadav, 2022; Gupta & Prusty, 2024), argues that digital access fundamentally transforms PBC into the more holistic, agentic state of Consumer Empowerment. Empowerment is conceptualized not just as a belief in one's capability to perform the behaviour (PBC), but as a superior state of agency derived from verifiable knowledge (Cuc, 2023) and the ability to choose ethically. This empowered state is a more robust predictor of intention, as it actively reduces the cognitive and informational uncertainty associated with sustainable purchases. Finally, the discussion addresses Modeling the Intention–Behaviour Gap through Credibility. The framework directly confronts the chronic intention–behaviour gap (Testa et al., 2020) by integrating two powerful, opposing moderators at the final purchase stages: Digital Trust and Perceived Greenwashing. High purchase intention, which is psychologically ready, will only convert into actual behaviour if trust in the digital disclosure and transactional platform is secured (Pham, Wang, & Huang, 2023). Conversely, the consumer's perception of greenwashing (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023) actively erodes their hard-won sense of empowerment and instantly negates purchase intention. This highlights that successful behavioural conversion requires both psychological readiness and externally validated credibility, making the digital tools that verify claims (e.g., blockchain) theoretically central to the final decision.

### 3.8 Contextual Discussion on the Indian Market (2020–2025)

The detailed contextual discussion of the Indian market is essential for establishing the model's external validity and practical applicability within an emerging economy framework. Firstly, the imperative for Localizing Digital Interventions is paramount. The pervasive issue of price sensitivity (Gupta & Singh, 2023) means that digital strategies cannot rely solely on altruistic environmental appeals. Instead, campaigns must be strategically designed to articulate the long-term economic value (Cui, 2024) of sustainable garments (e.g., durability, quality) to justify the initial price premium. Furthermore, to effectively bridge the significant digital heterogeneity gap between urban and rural segments (Mishra & Jain, 2023), digital outreach must prioritize vernacular content and localized micro-influencers to leverage established social norms (Sharma & Sheth, 2023). Secondly, the discussion highlights the importance of traceability and trust. Given that the Indian market often relies more heavily on social and cultural cues for trust formation (Schiarioli et al., 2024), merely providing general digital information is insufficient. The strategic adoption of verifiable traceability technologies (e.g., blockchain, QR codes detailing artisan origins or ethical labour certifications) is not a simple competitive advantage but an essential strategic imperative (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023). This provides the robust evidence necessary to enhance Digital Trust (Pham, Wang, & Huang, 2023) and furnish consumers with the ultimate credibility needed to proceed with a purchase, effectively de-risking the higher cost decision. Finally, the Strategic Role of Generation Z warrants specific discussion. Although the conceptual paper maintains a broad focus, the influence of the Gen Z consumer segment—a highly digitally engaged, socially conscious, and influential cohort in India—is central to the model's future efficacy (Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022; Kaivonen, 2024). Their acute sensitivity to greenwashing and high engagement levels underscore the need for brands to maintain absolute transparency. Future empirical research should explicitly test the model's structural invariance and robustness when applied specifically to this generation, as their behaviour is poised to drive the majority of sustainable apparel growth in India.

### 3.9 Synthesis: Insights from the Systematic Review

Drawing together the findings from 72 recent studies, several key insights emerge. First, there is robust evidence that digital influence strengthens consumer sustainability knowledge and reshapes TPB antecedents (attitude, norms, control). Second, digital transparency tools significantly enhance willingness to pay a premium, helping to close the intention–behaviour divide. Third, there is a glaring gap in the literature: very few conceptual or empirical models integrate digital, cognitive, and psychological constructs specifically for sustainable apparel. Finally, contextual factors, particularly in emerging markets like India (such as digital access, price sensitivity, and cultural norms), require more attention. Together, these insights justify the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework that captures the complex interplay of digital influence and sustainable apparel behaviour.

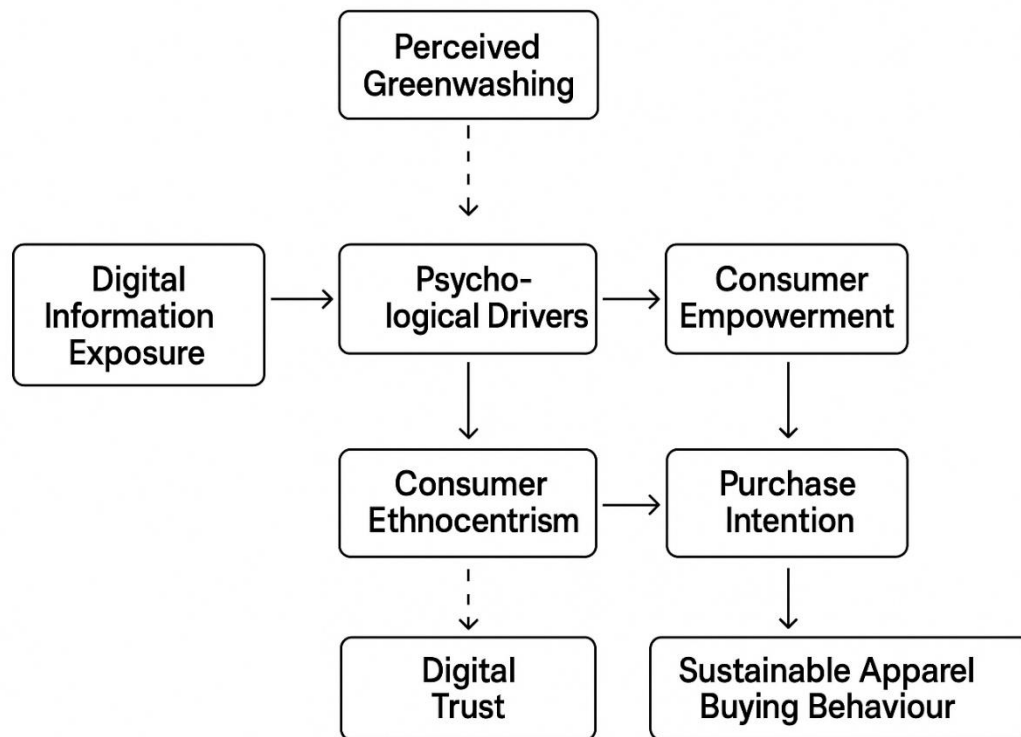
### PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The proposed conceptual model (Figure II) synthesizes insights from recent research on sustainable consumption, digital influence, and apparel to explain how digital impact factors shape consumer buying behavior toward sustainable apparel in India. Drawing from the SLR, the model integrates four higher-order constructs: Digital Information Exposure, Digital Engagement, Psychological Sustainability Drivers, and Consumer Empowerment Outcomes. Digital information exposure via social media content, influencer advocacy, brand transparency posts, and sustainability cues serves as the initial stimulus influencing consumer cognition (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023). Digital engagement, such as liking sustainability posts, participating in eco-dialogues, or interacting with green influencers, strengthens persuasion routes and internalization of sustainability values (Kong et al., 2022). Psychological sustainability drivers, such as attitude, perceived value, moral norms, and environmental consciousness, act as mediators through which digital triggers alter purchase-related evaluations. Furthermore, digital spaces enhance consumer empowerment by increasing knowledge, self-efficacy, and perceived consumer effectiveness, thereby creating a sense of agency that highlights the importance of sustainable choices (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). These collective mechanisms lead to a purchase intention, willingness to pay a premium, and ultimately, sustainable apparel buying behavior.

India's unique context, high digital penetration, rapid growth of conscious consumerism, and increasing influence of sustainability messaging amplify the relevance of digital ecosystems (Aithal & Aithal, 2021). Literature also suggests that Indian consumers place a



high value on digital trust, influencer credibility, and brand authenticity signals, rendering digital environments crucial for informed apparel decision-making (Jain et al., 2024). Therefore, the conceptual model positions digital impact not only as a communication conduit but also as a behaviour-shaping mechanism rooted in socio-psychological and empowerment-based theories.



**Figure II: Author's Representation of Proposed Conceptual Framework**

This structure reflects dual-route persuasion (ELM), empowerment theory, and sustainability behaviour models.

## 6. Propositions Development

Building on the synthesized insights from the systematic literature review and theoretical foundations, the following propositions articulate the conceptual logic underlying the proposed model. Each proposition is grounded in contemporary scholarly work across digital marketing, sustainable consumption, and apparel research. These propositions illustrate how digital ecosystems influence psychological, cognitive, and behavioural processes in the Indian sustainable apparel context. The intention is not to test hypotheses quantitatively but to articulate theoretically sound relationships that future empirical studies can examine.

**Proposition 1:** Digital information exposure has a positive influence on digital engagement with sustainable apparel content.

Digital environments increasingly serve as primary sources of sustainability information, shaping consumer awareness and attention toward eco-friendly apparel. Studies indicate that constant exposure to sustainability cues, such as green posts, ethical claims, traceability information, and influencer-created content, generates cognitive salience that prompts consumers to interact with this content (Grewal et al., 2021; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023). In the Indian context, high smartphone penetration and widespread use of social media platforms, particularly Instagram and YouTube, magnify this effect by enabling rapid dissemination of sustainability narratives (Jain et al., 2024).

Digital engagement is not merely passive viewing but includes actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in sustainability-driven digital communities. This transition from exposure to engagement aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which suggests that frequent message exposure increases motivation to process information more deeply. When consumers repeatedly encounter sustainable apparel content, they are more likely to form positive involvement and actively engage with it (Kong et al., 2022). Consequently, a positive link between exposure and engagement is well grounded.

**P1:** Digital information exposure positively influences digital engagement with sustainable apparel content.

**Proposition 2:** Digital engagement has a positive influence on psychological sustainability drivers.

Digital engagement deepens internal psychological processing of sustainability messages. Recent research demonstrates that active interaction with online sustainability content strengthens attitudes, moral norms, and perceived value toward eco-friendly fashion choices (Kim & Kim, 2022; Wang & Hao, 2021). Through repeated digital dialogues, community engagement, and immersive sustainability narratives, consumers begin to internalize sustainability as an integral part of their identity. This aligns with social cognitive theory, which posits that observational learning through peer-generated content and influencer advocacy enhances internal motivation.

Digital engagement also increases emotional resonance by exposing individuals to compelling visuals, storytelling, and testimonials about environmental impacts and ethical manufacturing practices. For instance, exposure to influencer

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activism and sustainability challenges can heighten environmental consciousness and moral responsibility (Widyanto & Agustina, 2022). Therefore, those who are highly engaged tend to develop stronger psychological drivers, such as favourable attitudes, positive beliefs, perception of personal responsibility, and readiness to support sustainable apparel.

P2: Digital engagement has a positive influence on psychological sustainability drivers related to sustainable apparel.

Proposition 3: Psychological sustainability drivers have a positive influence on consumer empowerment.

Psychological drivers such as positive sustainability attitudes, moral norms, perceived environmental value, and awareness serve as precursors to consumer empowerment. When consumers hold strong pro-sustainability beliefs, they feel more capable of making meaningful contributions to sustainable outcomes. Recent studies show that psychological determinants significantly enhance perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) and self-efficacy in sustainability decisions (Jain et al., 2024; Naeem & Ozuem, 2021).

Empowerment theory suggests that individuals who understand the importance of sustainability and identify personally with its goals develop a stronger sense of agency. In the apparel domain, consumers who believe in the environmental benefits of sustainable clothing feel more empowered to make informed decisions, support ethical brands, and reject unsustainable alternatives (Hwang et al., 2020). These psychological drivers act as motivational forces that transform sustainable values into perceived capability and confidence. Thus, psychological sustainability drivers strengthen consumer empowerment and foster conscious decision-making.

P3: Psychological sustainability drivers positively influence consumer empowerment towards sustainable apparel consumption.

Proposition 4: Consumer empowerment has a positive influence on purchase intention for sustainable apparel.

Empowered consumers, defined as those who possess adequate knowledge, self-efficacy, and confidence, are more likely to intend to purchase sustainable apparel. Empirical evidence indicates that perceived consumer effectiveness and sustainability knowledge significantly increase purchase intentions for ethical and eco-friendly products (Wang & Hao, 2021; Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). Empowerment reduces uncertainty, enhances decision clarity, and increases the perceived worthiness of sustainable apparel despite price premiums.

In India, where sustainability literacy is on the rise, empowerment plays a particularly critical role, as consumers often rely on digital information and testimonials to validate sustainability claims. When individuals feel informed and capable, they are more willing to commit to sustainable choices and prioritize them over conventional apparel options (Aithal & Aithal, 2021). Therefore, consumer empowerment acts as a strong precursor to intention formation.

P4: Consumer empowerment positively influences purchase intention toward sustainable apparel.

Proposition 5: Purchase intention has a positive influence on sustainable apparel buying behavior.

The intention–behaviour relationship is well established in sustainable consumption literature. Numerous studies confirm that stronger purchase intention leads to a higher likelihood of actual sustainable apparel purchase (Jain et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2022). Although factors such as availability, affordability, and social approval influence this transition, intention remains the primary predictor of eco-friendly consumption behaviour.

In digital settings, purchase intention is further reinforced by personalized recommendations, sustainability tags, digital nudges, and peer influence on e-commerce platforms. For Indian consumers, online shopping environments provide visibility into product details, certifications, and brand sustainability disclosures, increasing conversion rates. Hence, the directionality of the relationship is conceptually strong.

P5: Purchase intention positively influences sustainable apparel buying behaviour.

Proposition 6: Influencer credibility positively moderates the effect of digital engagement on psychological sustainability drivers.

Influencer credibility, defined by expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness, plays a critical moderating role in shaping how engagement translates into psychological sustainability drivers. Research has shown that credible influencers significantly enhance message trust and internalization, particularly in sustainability contexts where consumers seek reliable information (Widyanto & Agustina, 2022; Grewal et al., 2021).

In emerging markets like India, sustainability influencers and eco-focused content creators are increasingly shaping consumer perceptions by offering relatable narratives, ethical brand reviews, and lifestyle demonstrations. Thus, when consumers engage with content delivered by credible influencers, the psychological impact of sustainability messages becomes stronger.

P6: Influencer credibility positively moderates the relationship between digital engagement and psychological sustainability drivers.

Proposition 7: Perceived greenwashing negatively moderates the relationship between consumer empowerment and purchase intention.

Greenwashing, which involves making false or exaggerated sustainability claims, creates consumer skepticism and undermines empowerment. Research indicates that when consumers perceive a brand as engaging in greenwashing, their confidence in making sustainable purchases declines significantly (Delmas & Burbano, 2021). Greenwashing undermines trust, heightens perceived risk, and erodes the psychological sense of agency, particularly in sustainability decisions where credibility is crucial.

Given the rising incidence of misleading sustainability claims in the fashion industry, Indian consumers have become increasingly vigilant. If empowered consumers detect inconsistencies in brand claims, their intention to purchase sustainable apparel weakens. Therefore, perceived greenwashing acts as a negative moderator in the relationship between empowerment and intention.

P7: Perceived greenwashing negatively moderates the relationship between consumer empowerment and purchase intention.

Proposition 8: Digital trust positively moderates the relationship between purchase intention and sustainable apparel buying behaviour.

Digital trust refers to consumer confidence in online platforms, sustainability information systems, and brand digital disclosures. Numerous studies highlight that digital trust strengthens the conversion of intention into behaviour by reducing perceived risk and facilitating decision-making (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2022; Kong *et al.*, 2022).

In India's rapidly growing digital marketplace, trust in online purchase environments—secure payments, verified sustainability labels, transparent supply chain information—increases the likelihood that consumers with strong purchase intentions will follow through. Therefore, digital trust enhances the intention–behaviour linkage.

P8: Digital trust positively moderates the relationship between purchase intention and sustainable apparel buying behaviour.

### Theoretical Contribution

This conceptual paper offers four distinct theoretical contributions that advance sustainable consumption, digital marketing, and behavioural theory. First, the paper synthesizes digital influence theory with sustainable consumption research to propose a multi-level framework that explains how digital ecosystems—spanning influencers, platforms, traceability technologies, and interactive communication—shape psychological and behavioural outcomes. While existing literature examines isolated variables such as environmental concern (Dangelico, 2022), traceability (Cuc, 2023), or influencer credibility (Kaivonen, 2024), few studies integrate these into a coherent, context-sensitive framework. This integration is particularly relevant for emerging markets such as India, where digital penetration is high yet sustainability maturity is evolving (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2023). By bringing together digital exposure, engagement, psychological drivers, and empowerment, the model extends beyond traditional behavioural paradigms.

Second, the paper significantly extends Consumer Empowerment Theory by conceptualizing empowerment as a digitally enabled phenomenon rooted in information access, community validation, and interactive sustainability narratives. Prior studies have acknowledged empowerment in online shopping (Bittner & Shouran, 2021) and sustainable consumption (Rahman & Yadav, 2022), but seldom in the context of sustainable apparel, a category marked by high information asymmetry and low consumer literacy. By theorizing empowerment as a mediator between psychological drivers and purchase outcomes, this paper expands the theoretical boundaries of empowerment theory within the context of sustainability.

Third, this study advances the literature by demonstrating the centrality of digital engagement as a transformative mechanism rather than a passive media outcome. Traditional frameworks primarily emphasize exposure as a predictor of intention (Wang *et al.*, 2022), but emerging digital behaviour research shows that “active engagement”, commenting, sharing, following influencers, participating in sustainability challenges, creates deeper psychological change (Kim & Kim, 2022; Kong *et al.*, 2022). By positioning engagement as a dynamic antecedent of attitudes, norms, and perceived control, the model deepens the theoretical utility of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in digital sustainability contexts.

Ultimately, the framework situates sustainable apparel consumption in India, thereby contributing to the existing literature on consumer behavior in emerging markets. Indian consumers differ significantly from those in Western markets in terms of price sensitivity, digital literacy, trust in sustainability claims, ethnocentrism, and reliance on influencer cues (Gupta & Singh, 2023; Jain *et al.*, 2024). This conceptualization highlights the cultural nuances that influence sustainability decisions in India, promoting context-specific theoretical development in an area currently underrepresented in mainstream research on sustainable consumption.

### MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper offers actionable insights for fashion brands, sustainability practitioners, digital marketers, and policy-makers operating in emerging markets. First, brands must prioritize the creation of high-quality digital sustainability content, as digital exposure and engagement have been shown to have a positive influence on psychological acceptance (Sharma & Sheth, 2023). This includes using interactive storytelling, lifecycle videos, behind-the-scenes production footage, and transparent disclosures regarding environmental performance.

Second, influencer marketing strategies should focus on credibility, authenticity, and expertise. Research confirms that credible influencers significantly increase message trust and reduce perceived risks in sustainability decisions (Widyanto & Agustina, 2022). Brands should collaborate with influencers who not only promote fashion but also actively advocate ethical consumption.

Third, digital transparency tools such as blockchain-based supply chain verification, RFID tags, QR-based product passports, and certifications can mitigate concerns about greenwashing and enhance consumer empowerment (Cuc, 2023; Delmas & Burbano, 2021). Firms that invest in transparency infrastructure are better positioned to gain a competitive advantage in the eco-fashion segment.

Fourth, retailers and e-commerce platforms should incorporate interactive digital affordances such as sustainability filters, eco-labels, emissions calculators, and virtual try-on features to simplify information processing. These tools strengthen perceived behavioural control and facilitate empowered decision-making (Hwang *et al.*, 2020).

Fifth, policy-makers should leverage digital spaces to promote sustainability literacy, particularly among India's youth, who are heavy digital users (Jain *et al.*, 2024). National campaigns integrating sustainability messaging into educational content, social media platforms, and local influencer networks could significantly shift consumer mindsets.

Collectively, these implications underscore that digital ecosystems are not merely marketing channels but powerful psychological and behavioural intervention spaces that shape sustainable apparel consumption.

### RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This conceptual model provides a strong foundation for future empirical studies in sustainability and digital behaviour. First, researchers can test the proposed relationships using PLS-SEM, hierarchical modelling, or Bayesian SEM to validate psychological pathways across different consumer segments. Comparisons between Tier I and Tier II cities can reveal structural differences in digital literacy, trust, and sustainability motivations (Mishra & Jain, 2023).

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Second, future studies should investigate platform-specific persuasion. For instance, Instagram offers visual stimuli, YouTube provides long-form educational content, and emerging platforms like Threads or GreenEvo facilitate community-based sustainability engagement. Persuasion varies across media richness, interactivity, and content format (Dwivedi et al., 2021), making platform-level analysis a crucial scholarly direction.

Third, longitudinal studies may examine how repeated exposure to sustainability messaging leads to attitudinal and behavioural reinforcement over time. Sustainability behaviour is not static; it evolves through habit formation, identity development, and digital community participation (Pham et al., 2023).

Fourth, integrating digital trace analytics, such as engagement metrics, sentiment analysis, machine learning-based behavioral prediction, and clickstream analysis, can enable the real-time measurement of consumer empowerment and intention–behavior transitions (Cascavilla et al., 2024).

Fifth, future research should incorporate additional moderators such as environmental concern, cultural tightness looseness, social desirability bias, or perceived social status associated with sustainability (Cui, 2024). These factors may influence how digital messaging interacts with psychological drivers in India.

Ultimately, comparative cross-cultural research can determine whether digital engagement operates similarly across countries with varying sustainability norms. This would advance theoretical generalization beyond Indian consumers.

### Limitations

Although this conceptual paper integrates extensive literature and proposes theoretically grounded relationships, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, because the study is conceptual and grounded in a PRISMA-based SLR, the model lacks empirical validation. Future quantitative research is needed to test and refine the proposed pathways.

Second, while the model incorporates major digital and psychological constructs, certain contextual variables, such as regional consumption patterns, micro-cultural variations, and socio-economic factors, may influence apparel choices in India and are not fully accounted for (Gupta & Singh, 2023).

Third, digital ecosystems evolve rapidly; new platforms, AI-driven personalization systems, and emerging sustainability disclosure regulations may shift how digital influence shapes behaviour. Consequently, the model must be periodically revisited to remain relevant.

Finally, although the SLR adhered to PRISMA procedures, the inclusion of only English-language peer-reviewed articles may have excluded culturally relevant insights from regional publications or industry whitepapers.

### CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper advances understanding of how digital ecosystems shape sustainable apparel consumption in India by integrating digital exposure, engagement, psychological drivers, empowerment, and purchase behaviour within a unified framework. Drawing on 72 peer-reviewed studies from 2020 to 2024, this model offers a timely and comprehensive representation of emerging consumer patterns in digital sustainability contexts. Digital influence, when combined with credible information, transparency mechanisms, and active

consumer participation, significantly enhances willingness to pay and sustainable apparel adoption.

By contextualizing these pathways within the Indian market, characterized by increasing digital participation, evolving sustainability consciousness, and diverse consumption cultures, the model provides valuable insights for scholars and practitioners. Ultimately, this paper lays a strong foundation for future empirical validations and practical digital interventions that can accelerate India's shift toward responsible fashion consumption.

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