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WHY DOES ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS FAIL TO TRANSLATE INTO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN THE DIGITAL ERA? A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Environmental awareness is widely regarded as a prerequisite for sustainable consumption; however, increased awareness does not always translate into corresponding behavioral change, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the attitude–behavior gap. This gap has become increasingly relevant amid the rapid expansion of digital technology and social media, which have transformed the way individuals obtain environmental information and make consumption decisions. This study aims to examine the factors that hinder the translation of environmental awareness into sustainable consumption behavior in the digital era through a systematic literature review. Following the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA), relevant articles were identified and screened from the Scopus, ScienceDirect/Elsevier, and Google Scholar databases, limited to English-language publications from 2020–2025. A total of 18 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed thematically. The results show that the awareness–behavior gap is shaped by an interaction of psychological and cognitive factors, social and normative influences, economic and situational barriers, and the dual role of digital environments. Although digital platforms can strengthen environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions through social media exposure and online communities, greater digital engagement does not automatically produce sustainable consumption practices. This review concludes that environmental awareness alone is insufficient to drive behavioral change, and that bridging the gap requires an integrated approach combining supportive social norms, economic accessibility, and effective digital interventions such as digital nudging. These findings provide a conceptual foundation for developing more effective strategies to promote sustainable consumption in the digital era.

Keywords: *attitude-behavior gap; digital era; environmental awareness; sustainable consumption*

INTRODUCTION

Greater concern about environmental challenges and the effects of climate change has contributed to the growing importance of sustainable consumption as an approach to minimizing environmental impacts (Gunawan et al., 2025). Consumers are now increasingly aware of the importance of choosing environmentally friendly products and supporting responsible consumption practices (Nazish et al., 2024). However, such an increase in awareness has not been fully followed by a noticeable change in consumption behavior (Nguyen et al., 2019). Previous research has identified a discrepancy between individuals' environmental awareness and their actual sustainable consumption practices, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the attitude–behavior gap. Although most consumers express concern for the environment, only a small percentage consistently implement sustainable consumption behaviors in their daily lives (Duong, 2024). Environmental awareness refers to an individual's recognition, understanding, and concern regarding environmental problems and the consequences of consumption activities for the environment, as commonly discussed in environmental behavior literature (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Sustainable consumption behavior refers to actual consumption practices that seek to reduce environmental impacts, including purchasing, using, and disposing of products in ways that are more environmentally responsible, consistent with definitions in sustainable consumption research (Peattie & Collins, 2009). The distinction between awareness and actual behavior is important because previous research suggests that environmental awareness, positive attitudes, and purchase intentions may remain disconnected from actual consumption practices (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). For example, the reviewed studies indicate that environmental awareness can strengthen attitudes and intentions, while economic constraints, social norms, accessibility, convenience, and other situational conditions may prevent consumers from acting consistently with their environmental values (Ajzen, 1991; Stern, 2000). This gap is an important challenge in efforts to achieve sustainable development goals. Furthermore, advancements in digital technology and the increasing use of

social media have significantly influenced individuals access to information, perception formation, and consumption decision making processes (Macaas Urrego et al., 2024). Access to environmental information through digital platforms may contribute to a stronger relationship between individuals' environmental awareness and their engagement in sustainable consumption practices. Therefore, examining the role of the digital era in narrowing the gap between environmental awareness and sustainable consumption has become an increasingly important area of research. Despite the growing number of studies examining environmental awareness, sustainable consumption, and digital environments, an important research gap remains. First, previous studies tend to examine these relationships from relatively specific perspectives. Some studies focus on the environmental awareness–behavior or intention–behavior gap, whereas others examine the effects of social media, internet use, or digital marketing on environmental awareness and green purchase intentions. Other studies emphasize specific mechanisms such as social influence, motivation, economic constraints, or digital nudging. The existing evidence therefore remains fragmented across psychological, social, economic, and digital dimensions. The reviewed studies demonstrate that these dimensions jointly influence whether environmental awareness can be translated into actual sustainable consumption, but their relationships have not been sufficiently synthesized within an integrated digital-era framework.

Second, previous research frequently emphasizes awareness, attitudes, or behavioral intentions as intermediate outcomes rather than actual sustainable consumption behavior. For instance, the reviewed literature shows that environmental awareness can strengthen green attitudes and purchase intentions, but intentions remain distinct from actual consumption behavior. This indicates that the central issue is not merely whether digital technology increases environmental awareness, but under what conditions and through which mechanisms awareness can be translated into actual sustainable consumption. In particular, the distinction between digital information exposure and digital behavioral facilitation remains insufficiently synthesized. This study addresses these gaps by providing a systematic synthesis of the factors that

explain the environmental awareness–sustainable consumption gap within digital contexts. Unlike studies that examine individual relationships between environmental awareness, social media, or green consumption, this review integrates four interconnected dimensions: (1) psychological and cognitive factors, (2) social and normative influences, (3) economic and situational barriers, and (4) digital mechanisms. The novelty of this review therefore lies not only in examining the role of digital technology but also in explaining its dual function: digital environments may strengthen environmental knowledge, awareness, social influence, and behavioral intentions, while simultaneously failing to produce actual behavioral change when psychological, social, economic, or practical barriers remain unresolved. Based on this research gap and novelty, this systematic literature review seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors explain the gap between environmental awareness and actual sustainable consumption behavior?

RQ2: How do digital technology and social media influence the translation of environmental awareness into sustainable consumption behavior?

RQ3: What digital mechanisms can facilitate the transition from environmental awareness and intention to actual sustainable consumption behavior?

By answering these questions, this study synthesizes fragmented findings into an integrative understanding of the environmental awareness–sustainable consumption gap in the digital era. The findings are expected to provide a conceptual foundation for future empirical research and contribute to the development of more effective strategies that move beyond awareness raising toward behavioral facilitation and sustainable consumption practices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines as a systematic framework for identifying, screening, and synthesizing relevant literature using a narrative-thematic approach to accommodate the diversity of disciplines and research designs included in the review (Moher et al., 2009). The literature included in this

review comprised empirical studies and review articles published in reputable scientific journals or by credible institutions, with a specific focus on the relationship between environmental awareness or attitudes, sustainable consumption behavior, and at least one dimension of the digital environment, including social media, e-commerce, digital platforms, online activism, or digital interventions. Excluded articles are those that discuss pro-environmental behavior with no relevance to the digital context at all, opinion articles without empirical data or adequate literature reviews, and sources that are not fully accessible. The scientific literature in this review was searched using the multidisciplinary databases Scopus, ScienceDirect/Elsevier and Google Scholar. The initial search was conducted on January 6, 2026 and then updated on June 20, 2026 to check for the possibility of a new relevant publication. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords related to environmental awareness, sustainable consumption, and digital contexts using the Boolean operators "AND" and "OR". Synonyms and related terms were incorporated to ensure a comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies. The core search string was formulated as follows: ("environmental awareness" OR "environmental concern" OR "environmental knowledge" OR "environmental attitude") AND ("sustainable consumption" OR "green consumption" OR "sustainable consumer behavior" OR "green consumer behavior") AND ("social media" OR "digital platform" OR "e-commerce" OR "online activism" OR "digital intervention*" OR "digital nudge*" OR "digital environment*"). The search string was subsequently adapted to the search syntax and functionality of each database. The search was limited to journal articles published in English between 2020 and 2025, with the relevant terms searched within the title, abstract, and keywords where supported by the respective database. The complete set of keywords used in each database, along with the constraints applied to each search, is detailed in **Figure 1.**

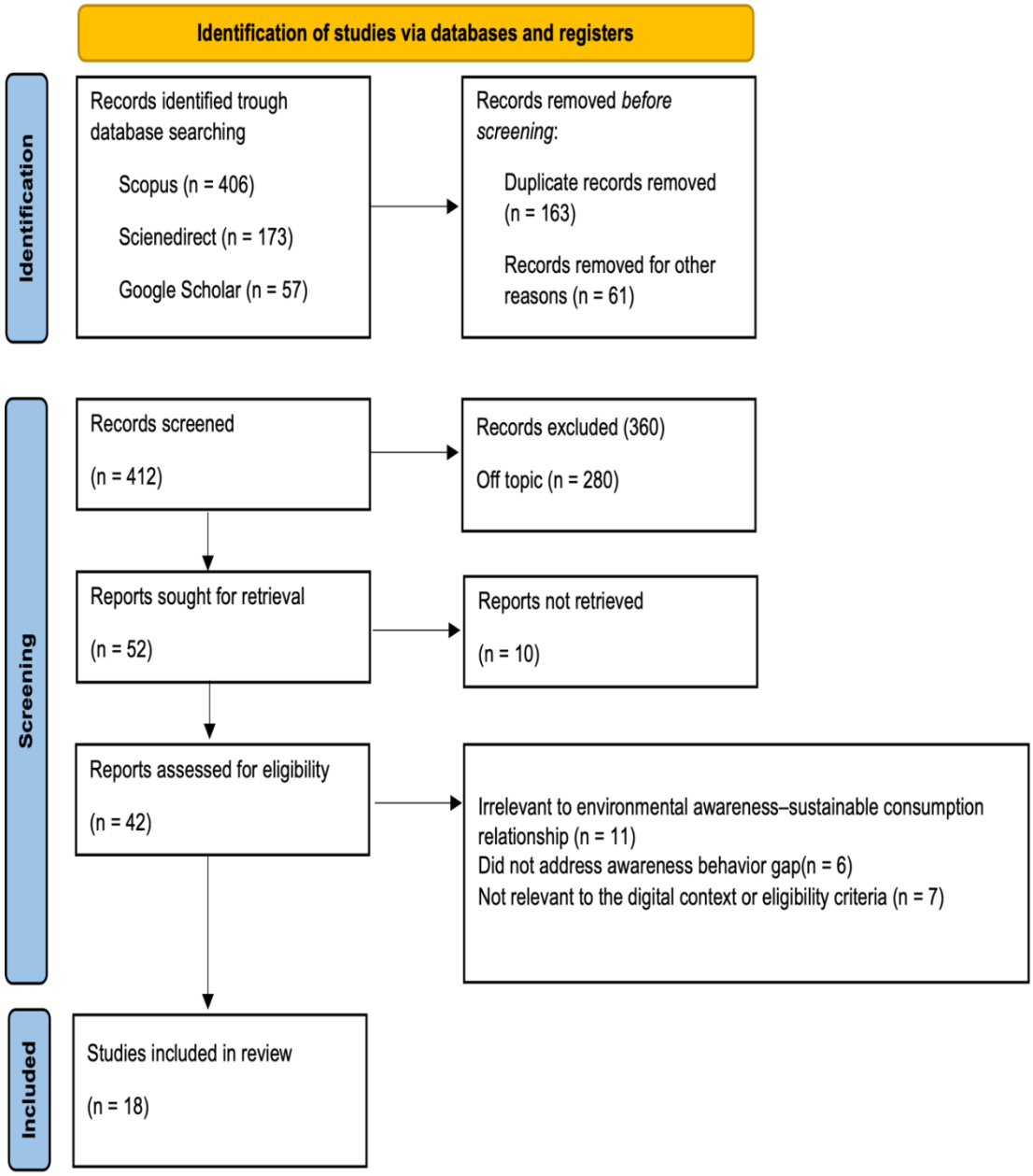

Figure 1. PRISMA Protocol Systematic Review Flow Chart

Source: Framework Construct Model by Investigation Team (2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Characteristics and General Findings of the Selected Studies

A total of 18 studies were included in this systematic literature review (see **Table 1**). The selected studies were published between 2021 and 2025 and examined the relationship between environmental awareness, environmental concern, sustainable consumption, pro-environmental behavior, and digital

contexts. The studies employed diverse research approaches, predominantly quantitative methods, including survey-based studies, explanatory and behavioral analyses, econometric analysis, experimental research, comparative studies, big-data analysis, and PLS-SEM. The research contexts were also diverse, covering Malaysia, Brazil, Portugal, China, India, South Africa, Generation Z, Millennials, Centennials, higher education institutions, online consumer platforms, social media, and sustainable fashion. This diversity indicates that the awareness–behavior relationship has been investigated across different consumer groups, geographical contexts, and digital environments.

Overall, the 18 studies reveal a consistent pattern: environmental awareness, concern, knowledge, attitudes, and intentions are important foundations for sustainable consumption, but they do not consistently translate into actual behavior. Teng et al (2025) found that internet use was associated with pro-environmental behavior through environmental concern, while Khalufi (2025) showed that digital nudges could support sustainable consumer decisions. However, Mabaso et al. (2025) demonstrated that environmental concern or purchase intention does not necessarily result in consistent pro-environmental or green purchasing behavior.

Table 1. Journal Classification

No.	Author & Year	Focus	Method	Key Finding
1	Teng et al. (2025)	Internet use & pro-environmental behavior	Quantitative	Environmental concern mediates the relationship between internet use and pro-environmental behavior.
2	Khalufi (2025)	Digital nudges & sustainable behavior	Quantitative	Digital nudges can help translate environmental concern into sustainable decisions.
3	Mannoni (2025)	Environmental concern–behavior gap	Empirical	High environmental concern does not necessarily result in pro-environmental behavior.
4	Ali et al. (2021)	Environmental awareness & sustainable consumption	Quantitative	Awareness and sustainable consumption are influenced by social and situational conditions.
5	Shen et al. (2023)	Social media green communities	Quantitative	Social influence and online community participation can encourage pro-environmental behavior.
6	Severo et al. (2021)	Awareness & sustainable	Quantitative comparative	Awareness–consumption relationships vary across generations and contexts.

No.	Author & Year	Focus	Method	Key Finding
		consumption		
7	Mariani & Borghi (2023)	Environmental concern on digital platforms	Big-data analysis	Online environmental concern does not necessarily represent actual sustainable consumption.
8	Xie et al. (2022)	Social media & environmental awareness	Econometric analysis	Social media exposure increases environmental awareness, but awareness alone may not produce behavior.
9	Jadhav & Verma (2024)	Environmental awareness & sustainable consumerism	Consumer study	Consumers face practical barriers in translating awareness into sustainable purchasing.
10	Hu et al. (2024)	Social media marketing & green products	Quantitative	Social media marketing strengthens green repurchase intentions, but intention does not guarantee behavior.
11	Canoğlu & Üstüner (2025)	Awareness, knowledge & social norms	Quantitative	Environmental knowledge and personal/social norms strengthen the effect of awareness on sustainable consumption intention.
12	Shehawy & Ali Khan (2024)	Green awareness & purchase intention	Quantitative	Green awareness strengthens attitudes and purchase intentions, but intention remains distinct from behavior.
13	Valencia-Arias et al. (2025)	Environmental awareness & willingness to pay	PLS-SEM	Environmental awareness contributes to willingness to pay for sustainable fashion, while price remains a barrier.
14	Alam et al. (2024)	Social media & green purchase intention	Experimental	Social media influences green purchase intention through altruistic and egoistic motivations.
15	Jillani et al. (2025)	Social media & sustainable consumption	Quantitative	Social media affects knowledge, attitudes, and practices, but these dimensions do not necessarily develop equally.
16	Wang & Mangmeechai (2021)	Environmental intention & behavior	Quantitative	Positive environmental intentions do not consistently translate into actual pro-environmental behavior.
17	Kirsten & Biyase (2025)	Environmental concern & income	Econometric	Economic conditions, particularly income, influence the translation of environmental concern into behavior.
18	Mabaso et al. (2025)	Green purchase intention–behavior gap	Quantitative	Green purchase intention does not consistently result in actual green purchasing.

Source: Researcher Analysis (2026)

2. Environmental Awareness–Behavior Gap in Sustainable Consumption

Evidence from the reviewed literature consistently indicates that environmental awareness or concern does not necessarily translate into actual sustainable behavior. Environmental awareness may encourage individuals to recognize environmental problems and develop positive attitudes toward sustainability, but it does not necessarily

result in corresponding changes in consumption practices. A persistent discrepancy remains between environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior, suggesting that concern for environmental issues does not necessarily lead to corresponding changes in individual behavior. Similarly, found that positive environmental intentions do not necessarily result in actual pro-environmental behavior (Wang & Mangmeechai, 2021). revealed a discrepancy between green purchase intentions and actual purchasing behavior, suggesting that consumers' intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products are not always reflected in their actual consumption decisions. Furthermore demonstrated that green awareness plays an important role in strengthening the relationship between green attitudes and purchase intentions. However, positive purchase intentions remain distinct from actual purchasing behavior. These findings suggest that environmental awareness constitutes a fundamental factor in promoting sustainable consumption, although it alone is insufficient to predict actual consumer behavior. The association between environmental awareness and sustainable consumption behavior is further shaped by contextual factors, as both may differ across social conditions and demographic characteristics. This suggests that the awareness–behavior gap cannot be understood solely as an individual cognitive problem. Consumers may possess sufficient environmental awareness while facing conditions that prevent them from behaving consistently with their environmental values. Overall, the findings indicate that the central challenge of sustainable consumption is not limited to increasing environmental awareness. The more significant issue concerns the conversion of awareness, concern, attitudes, and intentions into actual behavior. Environmental awareness should therefore be understood as one component within a broader behavioral process influenced by internal and external conditions.

3. Psychological, Social, and Normative Factors

Psychological and cognitive factors play an important role in determining whether environmental awareness develops into sustainable consumption. The reviewed studies identify environmental

knowledge, attitudes, motivation, behavioral intention, and perceived behavioral readiness as relevant mechanisms. Canoğlu and Üstüner (2025) demonstrate that environmental awareness interacts with environmental knowledge, personal norms, and social norms in shaping sustainable consumption intentions. This finding indicates that awareness alone does not provide sufficient motivation for sustainable consumption unless it is reinforced by other cognitive and normative factors. Consumers with greater environmental awareness may develop more favorable attitudes toward green products, but these attitudes still require sufficient motivation and behavioral readiness before they can influence purchasing decisions (Shen et al., 2023). This explains why consumers may express strong support for sustainability while maintaining conventional consumption habits. When sustainable consumption is socially supported and perceived as desirable, consumers are more likely to translate their environmental awareness into corresponding behavior when supported by favorable social conditions. Accordingly, the discrepancy between environmental awareness and sustainable consumption is partly shaped by the social context in which consumption decisions are made. Environmental awareness becomes more likely to influence behavior when it is supported by strong personal values, social norms, and motivation. Conversely, weak normative support and insufficient behavioral motivation may prevent consumers from translating environmental awareness into consistent sustainable consumption practices.

4. Economic and Situational Barriers to Sustainable Consumption

Economic conditions represent another important explanation for the discrepancy between environmental awareness and sustainable consumption. Consumers may understand environmental problems and prefer environmentally responsible products but remain constrained by financial considerations. Kirsten & Biyase (2025) found that income plays a significant role in shaping the association between environmental concern and environmental behavior. This indicates that consumers' economic capacity can determine whether environmental concern can be implemented through actual

consumption choices. Price considerations are particularly relevant when sustainable products require consumers to pay more than conventional alternatives. Environmental awareness is associated with consumers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable fashion products (Valencia-Arias et al., 2025). Their findings indicate that the adoption of sustainable alternatives is influenced by consumers' willingness and financial ability to bear the associated additional costs. Environmental awareness may therefore coexist with conventional purchasing behavior when consumers perceive sustainable products as economically less accessible. Situational and behavioral constraints also contribute to this discrepancy. Wang & Mangmeechai (2021) demonstrate that environmental intention does not consistently result in actual pro-environmental behavior, while Mabaso et al. (2025) similarly identify differences between green purchase intentions and actual behavior. These findings indicate that actual consumption is influenced by conditions beyond environmental attitudes and intentions. Accessibility, convenience, product availability, habitual consumption, and perceived behavioral control may determine whether sustainable choices can be implemented in everyday life. Consumers may possess environmental awareness and positive intentions but continue choosing conventional alternatives when sustainable products are less accessible, more expensive, or less convenient. Consequently, efforts to encourage sustainable consumption should address practical and economic barriers in addition to increasing environmental knowledge.

5. The Role of the Digital Era in the Awareness–Consumption Gap

Digitalization has significantly transformed the way consumers obtain environmental information and interact with sustainability issues. Internet use, social media, online communities, digital marketing, and other digital platforms have expanded access to environmental information and increased opportunities for environmental engagement. However, the reviewed studies indicate that greater digital exposure does not automatically result in sustainable consumption. Teng et al (2025) found that internet use is associated with pro-environmental behavior through increased environmental concern,

suggesting that digital access may facilitate sustainable behavioral practices by enhancing individuals' awareness of environmental issues. Xie et al (2022) similarly, the findings indicate that social media use contributes to the development of environmental awareness. Digital platforms can therefore facilitate environmental learning and increase public exposure to sustainability-related information. Nevertheless, increased environmental awareness through digital media does not necessarily guarantee actual behavioral change. Mariani & Borghi (2023) demonstrate that consumers increasingly express environmental concerns through online discourse and reviews. Although such digital engagement reflects environmental concern, online expressions cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of sustainable consumption. Consumers may actively engage with environmental content in digital spaces while maintaining consumption patterns that are inconsistent with their expressed environmental values. Social media can also influence sustainable consumption through social and motivational mechanisms. Alam et al (2024) Furthermore, the findings reveal that social media influences green purchase intentions through altruistic and egoistic motivations, while Hu et al (2024) highlight the role of social media marketing in shaping consumers' intentions to repurchase green products. These findings indicate that digital platforms can support sustainable consumption when environmental information is accompanied by motivational and social influences. Differences between these dimensions indicate that greater knowledge and positive attitudes do not necessarily result in equivalent changes in actual practices. Digitalization may therefore successfully increase environmental knowledge and awareness while leaving the behavioral gap unresolved. Digital interventions may become more effective when they move beyond information dissemination. Khalufi, (2025) the findings indicate that digital nudges play an important role in influencing sustainable consumer behavior. Digital nudging can influence consumer decisions by structuring digital environments in ways that facilitate sustainable choices. These findings suggest that digital technology contributes not only to enhancing environmental awareness but also to

reducing behavioral barriers and facilitating consumers' decision-making processes. Overall, the digital environment serves a dual function in the relationship between environmental awareness and sustainable consumption. Digital technologies can strengthen environmental knowledge, awareness, social influence, and sustainable consumption intentions, but these effects do not necessarily translate directly into actual behavior. The effectiveness of digital environments depends on their ability to address the psychological, social, economic, and practical barriers that separate environmental awareness from sustainable consumption. Therefore, bridging the awareness–consumption gap requires an integrated approach that combines environmental awareness with supportive social norms, economic accessibility, behavioral facilitation, and effective digital interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review indicates that environmental awareness constitutes an important foundation for sustainable consumption, but it does not necessarily result in corresponding consumer behavior. Based on the reviewed studies, the awareness–consumption gap is influenced by the interaction of psychological and cognitive factors, social and normative influences, economic and situational barriers, and digital mechanisms. Although digital platforms can increase environmental knowledge, awareness, social influence, and sustainable consumption intentions through social media, online communities, and digital communication, greater exposure to environmental information does not automatically lead to actual sustainable consumption behavior. Digital environments therefore have a dual role: they can strengthen awareness and behavioral intentions while also failing to overcome the practical, economic, psychological, and social barriers that prevent behavioral change.

From a theoretical perspective, this review contributes to the literature by providing an integrative framework for understanding the environmental awareness–sustainable consumption gap in digital contexts. Rather than viewing environmental awareness as a direct determinant of sustainable consumption, the findings suggest that the translation of awareness into behavior is a

multidimensional process shaped by psychological, social, economic, situational, and digital factors. The review also highlights the dual role of digital environments, demonstrating that digitalization should not be understood solely as a means of increasing environmental information exposure. Digital mechanisms may contribute to behavioral change when they are combined with social influence, motivation, accessibility, and behavioral facilitation. This perspective provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies examining the conditions under which digital environments can effectively bridge the awareness–behavior gap.

The findings also provide practical implications for different stakeholders. For policymakers, sustainability policies should move beyond awareness campaigns by incorporating behavioral interventions, improving access to sustainable products, and reducing economic and practical barriers to sustainable consumption. For businesses, digital marketing and communication strategies should provide credible environmental information while facilitating sustainable choices rather than focusing solely on increasing consumer awareness. For educators, environmental education should connect environmental knowledge with practical decision-making and everyday consumption practices, including critical engagement with sustainability information on digital platforms. Environmental organizations can utilize social media and online communities not only to disseminate environmental information but also to strengthen social norms, motivation, and collective engagement in sustainable consumption. Meanwhile, digital platform providers can incorporate behavioral-support mechanisms, such as sustainability information, personalized prompts, and digital nudges, to make sustainable choices more visible and accessible to users. These recommendations are consistent with the finding that effective digital interventions need to move beyond information dissemination toward behavioral facilitation. However, this review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings. First, the review included only English-language journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 and relied on literature retrieved from Scopus, ScienceDirect/Elsevier, and Google

Scholar. Therefore, relevant studies published in other languages, outside the selected publication period, or not indexed in these databases may not have been captured. Second, the relatively limited number of studies included in the final synthesis may restrict the generalizability of the findings across different countries, cultures, demographic groups, and digital environments. Third, the diversity of research designs, contexts, and measures used across the reviewed studies limits direct comparison and prevents the findings from being interpreted as universally applicable causal relationships. The findings should therefore be understood as a conceptual synthesis of existing evidence rather than as a universally generalizable model.

Future research should address these limitations by conducting empirical studies across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts and by testing the proposed relationships using comparable measures and longitudinal or experimental research designs. Future studies may also examine specific digital mechanisms, such as digital nudging, social influence, personalized sustainability information, and online community engagement, to determine which mechanisms are most effective in translating environmental awareness and behavioral intentions into actual sustainable consumption.

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