



# ECO-GUILTY PLEASURE: UNDERSTANDING THE UNSUSTAINABLE CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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## Abstract:

This paper provides insights into the psychological and social aspects of the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox, consumer behaviour that contradicts their sustainability awareness. The aim of this paper is to understand why individuals often persist in unsustainable consumer practices despite being aware of their negative environmental impact. By examining relevant theories and research in the field of consumer psychology and behaviour, this study offers a deeper understanding of the factors shaping such behaviour and proposes strategies for changing unsustainable habits to preserve the environment. Understanding the psychological and social mechanisms behind the 'eco-guilty pleasure' phenomenon contributes to the development of effective strategies that encourage consumers to adopt sustainable consumption habits.

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## Keywords:

'eco-guilty pleasure', consumer behaviour, consumption habits, sustainability.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current societal context, there is an increasing awareness of the urgency of environmental conservation and the need for sustainable living (Cakanlar et al., 2023; Kirsten & Biyase, 2023; Zeng et al., 2023). Consumers worldwide are becoming more informed about the ecological challenges we face and are increasingly making sustainable choices in their consumption (Brdar, 2023; Živković & Brdar, 2018). However, despite growing environmental awareness, there exists a paradoxical phenomenon in which consumers consciously choose unsustainable products or services, despite being aware of their negative environmental impact (Gallo et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2019; Moser, 2016). This phenomenon will be recognized as an 'eco-guilty pleasure.' It poses a challenge for researchers, marketing experts, and brands striving to promote sustainable values and encourage consumers to make more environmentally responsible choices. The question arises: why do consumers, despite their awareness of ecological implications, often succumb and opt for unsustainable consumer options that satisfy their immediate desires and needs? The aim of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms behind the 'eco-guilty pleasure' phenomenon to identify key factors influencing such consumer behaviour. Through this insight, we intend to provide guidelines and strategies to help overcome this paradox and encourage consumers towards more consistent sustainable choices.

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Theories of consumer behaviour and sustainability

Theories of consumer behaviour and sustainability serve as the foundation for understanding the motivations and factors that influence consumers' choices towards more sustainable options (Balderjahn et al., 2023; Čapienė et al., 2022; Hazaea et al., 2022). These theories provide insights into the psychological, social, and economic factors shaping consumer behaviour in relation to sustainability and aid in identifying key intervention points to promote sustainable consumption (Živković & Brdar, 2018).

Rational choice theory assumes that consumers make rational decisions based on maximizing their benefits and minimizing costs (Lahno, 2007; Quackenbush, 2004). When it comes to sustainability, consumers are likely to opt for sustainable choices if they believe it will bring them greater benefits or satisfaction (Meise et al., 2014). For example, a consumer may choose a sustainable product because they believe it is of better quality and more durable than unsustainable alternatives. Social norms theory suggests that consumers often make decisions in line with the norms and values of their social group or community (Gaymard, 2014; Young, 2015). If sustainability becomes an accepted and desirable norm within a specific social group, consumers are likely to choose sustainable options more frequently to fit in and meet their community's expectations (White et al., 2019). Expectancy-value theory emphasizes that consumers make choices based on their perception of expectations and values related to a particular product or service (Shepperd & Taylor, 1999). If consumers believe that sustainable products or services will have more benefits for the environment or for themselves personally, they are likely to be more inclined to choose them compared to unsustainable options (Brach et al., 2017). Sustainable behaviour theory specifically focuses on understanding consumer behaviour in the context of sustainability (Banytė et al., 2020). Sustainable behaviour encompasses various aspects, including recycling, reduced consumption, support for sustainable brands, and other environmentally responsible practices. It explores the motivations, barriers, and strategies consumers use to adopt and maintain sustainable consumption patterns (Vainio et al., 2020). Social influence theory investigates how consumers are influenced by others and society in their consumer choices (Ward, 1978). For instance, social pressure, the influence of friends, family, or media campaigns can impact consumer decisions regarding sustainability. This theory underscores the importance of societal engagement in promoting sustainable values and consumption. The desire for group affiliation and fear of social exclusion can motivate people to adopt sustainable habits, even if they hadn't practiced them previously (Salazar et al., 2013).

Combining these theories helps create a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour regarding sustainability. Different consumers may be motivated by different factors, so it is crucial for marketing strategies and interventions aimed at promoting sustainability to recognize these diverse motives and tailor their approaches accordingly. Simultaneously, societal engagement, education, and raising awareness about the importance of sustainable behaviour are also paramount in effecting positive change and supporting sustainable consumption.

### 2.2. The role of marketing strategies in shaping sustainable consumer habits

The role of marketing strategies in shaping consumer habits, especially in the context of sustainability, is deeply complex and pivotal in understanding how consumers make purchasing decisions and use products or services (Živković & Brdar, 2018). Marketing strategies play a role in shaping consumers' perceptions of products, creating demand for sustainable options, and supporting behaviour change (Hazaea et al., 2022).

Marketing campaigns are often used to educate consumers about environmental issues and solutions. For instance, Patagonia launched the "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign to emphasize the importance of reducing consumer consumption and extending the lifespan of products. This campaign raised awareness about overconsumption and contributed to promoting sustainable consumer habits (Patagonia We're in business to save our home planet., 2022). Companies that highlight their sustainable practices often attract consumers who support environmentally responsible brands. In that way they enhance brand perception. For example, Unilever launched the "Sustainable Living Plan" to improve its ecological reputation and build loyalty among consumers who identify with sustainable values. This led to increased brand loyalty (Unilever PLC, 2021). Daily, we encounter marketing manipulations, promoting unsustainable consumer choices, aimed at grabbing attention and often conflicting with sustainability. Marketing campaigns often strive to establish deep emotional connections between consumers and products or brands. They use narratives that evoke empathy, happiness, or nostalgia to make consumers develop a sentimental attachment to the product (Živković & Brdar, 2018). This emotional connection often overshadows consumers' environmental awareness, making them less inclined to consider the negative impacts of the product on the environment. To attract environmentally conscious consumers, some companies use "green" labels or eco-friendly tags on their products. These labels imply that the products are environmentally acceptable, even if it may not necessarily be true. Consumers can be misled into choosing unsustainable options, believing they are



making a sustainable choice. This tactic is often referred to as "greenwashing" (Jong et al., 2017). Marketing campaigns often employ tactics that create a sense of urgency among consumers. This includes limited offers, time-limited promotions, and messages suggesting that now is the right time to make a purchase (Kacen et al., 2012). This pressure for quick buying decisions can prompt consumers to make hasty choices and purchase products that may not align with their sustainable values.

### 3. FACTORS INFLUENCING ECO-GUILTY PLEASURE

'Eco-guilty pleasure' represents paradoxical behaviour in which consumers continue to engage in unsustainable consumer habits despite being aware of their negative environmental impact. This paradox involves an awareness of environmental issues while simultaneously practicing unsustainable consumer habits. The factors influencing 'eco-guilty pleasure' constitute a crucial area of research that analyses consumers' contradictory behaviour regarding sustainability.

The cultural context can significantly impact 'eco-guilty pleasure.' In societies where consumerism is deeply ingrained, and where consumer identity is often linked to status, individuals may feel pressure to continue unsustainable consumption patterns, despite being aware of environmental issues (Paolo & Stan, 2014). In the United States, per capita energy consumption is significantly higher compared to many other countries (Maguire, 2023). This factor is partially a result of the cultural emphasis on individualism and a consumer-centric way of life, which can lead to 'eco-guilty pleasure' as consumers retain unsustainable habits. Interaction with friends, family, and social groups can have a strong influence on consumer choices. If the consumer's environment supports unsustainable habits or does not set expectations for sustainable behaviour, 'eco-guilty pleasure' may result from this social pressure (Paolo & Stan, 2014; Salazar et al., 2013). For example, adolescents may feel pressured to purchase fast fashion to conform to social norms, even though they are aware of the negative impacts of this industry on the environment. The price of sustainable products and services is often higher compared to their unsustainable alternatives (Pieters et al., 2022). This can limit access to sustainable options, forcing consumers to choose cheaper but unsustainable alternatives. For instance, organic products often come with higher price tags than conventional ones, which can limit access to sustainable options for budget-conscious consumers.

A lack of education on environmental issues and sustainable alternatives can contribute to 'eco-guilty pleasure.' Consumers who are unaware of the impact of their

choices on the environment and society may uncritically continue unsustainable consumer habits (Paolo & Stan, 2014). Consumers often have different values and priorities in life. For example, some consumers may prioritize economic gain or personal comfort, while others may prioritize environmental preservation (Hu et al., 2016). In some cases, consumers may feel limited in choosing sustainable options due to a lack of alternatives in the market or infrastructure supporting sustainable habits (Sheoran & Kumar, 2020). For example, a lack of bike lanes or public transportation can force people to use private cars, even if they would prefer to reduce their ecological footprint.

#### 3.1. Consumer cognitive patterns maintaining the eco-guilty pleasure paradox

Consumer cognitive patterns play a crucial role in maintaining the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox. These patterns develop within the consumer's mind and are often used as mechanisms to justify or rationalize unsustainable choices. Here are several cognitive patterns contributing to this paradox:

- **Cognitive Dissonance:** Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual experiences internal conflict between their values and actual behaviour (Živković & Brdar, 2018). For example, a consumer who considers themselves environmentally conscious may feel conflicted when purchasing a product with a large ecological footprint. To reduce this dissonance, consumers may justify their choices or suppress awareness of the negative ecological consequences.
- **Procrastination:** Consumers often delay making changes in their consumption habits towards sustainability (Paolo & Stan, 2014). The procrastination of these changes, such as transitioning to more sustainable products or reducing consumption, may stem from a fear of losing comfort or familiarity.
- **Defensive mechanisms and justification:** Consumers may employ defensive mechanisms to rationalize their unsustainable choices. Consumers frequently justify unsustainable choices with arguments like "everyone else does it" or "I have no other choice" (Cutright et al., 2011). This can include minimizing environmental issues, denying the seriousness of the problems, or shifting responsibility onto other factors.
- **Information Overload:** An excessive amount of information about environmental issues and sustainable alternatives can lead to apathy and confusion (Meise et al., 2014; Paolo & Stan, 2014). Consumers may feel overwhelmed by information and give up on attempting to make sustainable choices.



- **Perceived Lack of Impact:** Consumers may perceive their individual contributions to environmental issues as negligible and believe that their choices have no significant impact on global ecological challenges (Grimmer & Miles, 2014). This perception can lead them to exert less effort in making sustainable decisions.
- **Temporal Discounting:** Consumers often prioritize immediate gratification and comfort over long-term ecological goals (Arbuthnott, 2010). Delaying immediate satisfaction for the sake of long-term resource preservation can be challenging for many consumers.

All these cognitive patterns often work together, creating a mental equilibrium that supports the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox. Understanding these patterns can help develop strategies to overcome this paradox and encourage consumers to make sustainable choices.

### 3.2. Consumer emotional patterns maintaining the eco-guilty pleasure paradox

The emotional component of sustainable consumption represents a key factor shaping our choices as consumers. It deeply connects our emotions, values, and identity with the products we purchase and the services we use (Živković & Brdar, 2018). This emotional connection can be a driver of sustainable choices but can also pose challenges when facing the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox.

When discussing the emotional component of sustainable consumption, it is important to understand how our emotional response to products and brands is formed. The emotional appeal of sustainable products can arise from the sense of satisfaction we get when we know we are contributing to the protection of the planet and society (Wang & Wu, 2016). The feelings of pride and fulfilment that come with sustainable choices can be powerful motivators for many consumers. For example, using products produced without harmful chemicals or buying local products can bring a sense of moral fulfilment and contribution to the greater good. On the other hand, the emotional appeal of unsustainable products often relies on immediate gratification, convenience, and social prestige (Arbuthnott, 2010). Marketing campaigns often play a crucial role in establishing an emotional connection with unsustainable products. By using compelling narratives, appealing to emotions, and creating visual attractions, brands can establish a deep emotional bond with consumers (Alčaković et al., 2019). For example, fast-food advertisements often depict happy families enjoying meals together, creating a sense of connection and happiness associated with that brand. Emotional rewards and feelings of satisfaction play a crucial role in reinforcing unsus-

tainable consumer choices. When consumers make unsustainable choices, such as buying cheap, fast-decaying products or using disposable plastics, they often experience immediate emotional rewards. The feeling of satisfaction comes from the convenience, immediate pleasure, or ease of using these products. These feelings often stem from immediate gratification, comfort, and aesthetic pleasure that certain products or services provide (Phillips & Baumgartner, 2002). This immediate sense of satisfaction can be a powerful motivator for consumers and often outweighs longer-term considerations of environmental and societal implications. In many cases, consumers tend to prioritize their immediate needs and desires, disregarding the long-term effects of their choices. Personal experiences and habits also shape the emotional connection to unsustainable products. If we have become accustomed to certain products or brands throughout our lives, we may develop an emotional attraction to them and feel comfortable using them (Amatulli et al., 2020). In the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox, consumers often face a conflict between these emotional components. The guilt and concern about environmental issues may clash with the immediate pleasure or social prestige that comes with unsustainable choices (Amatulli et al., 2020; Paolo & Stan, 2014). This emotional conflict can create internal tension that makes it challenging to make sustainable decisions.

Managing the emotional component of sustainable consumption requires a deep understanding of our own values, emotions, and consumer identity. It involves strengthening the emotional connection to sustainable choices, exploring alternatives that provide satisfaction and comfort, and aligning our social identity with sustainable values. Emotional intelligence and environmental awareness play a crucial role in overcoming the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox and making sustainable consumer decisions that align with our values and emotions.

## 4. OVERCOMING THE PARADOX: STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE CHOICES

Overcoming the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox requires thoughtful application of various strategies to encourage sustainable choices. Three key strategies that can be implemented to address this paradox. Education and raising awareness about sustainability play a crucial role in empowering consumers to make sustainable choices. Activities such as educational programs, awareness campaigns, and workshops can help consumers better understand the environmental and social consequences of their choices (Kuźniar et al., 2021). Through education, individuals can become more aware of their role in preserving the planet and motivated to take sustainable steps. As the second, promoting sustainable alternatives and innovations is also



key to overcoming the paradox. Brands and companies can develop sustainable products and services that are affordable, practical, and attractive to consumers. Innovations in environmental technologies, recycling, and energy efficiency can transform the market and offer sustainable alternatives that meet consumer needs. An example of this is Tesla, a company that has become synonymous with electric cars. Their Model 3 has become popular due to its sustainable technology and performance (Tillman, 2020). The third strategy - the influence of social media and influencers in promoting sustainable behaviour is becoming increasingly significant (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). Campaigns and actions that promote sustainability through social media can inspire people to change their habits and make sustainable choices (Perrault & Clark, 2018). When influencers endorse sustainable brands and products, it can further encourage consumers to turn to sustainable alternatives. Combining these strategies can create a positive framework for overcoming the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox and enable consumers to engage in sustainable behaviour without internal conflicts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox represents a complex challenge in contemporary society, where consumers often grapple with an internal conflict between their awareness of environmental issues and unsustainable consumption habits. It's important to recognize that no one is perfectly environmentally responsible, but every step towards reducing our negative impact on the environment is significant. By gradually adopting more sustainable lifestyles and supporting initiatives that promote environmental responsibility, we can hope to reduce this contradiction between our "eco-guilty pleasures" and our environmental values over time. Further research is also essential. A deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects of this paradox can aid in developing more effective strategies for promoting sustainability. Additionally, researching the cognitive, social, and cultural factors that shape consumer habits can provide valuable insights into different contexts and communities. In summary, overcoming the 'eco-guilty pleasure' paradox requires a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses education, innovation, and social influence. Only through a combination of these factors can we create an environment in which consumers make sustainable choices with satisfaction and without internal conflict, thereby achieving a positive impact on the planet and society.

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