

THE ROLES OF MORAL NORM AND NEED FOR STATUS IN PREDICTING GREEN PURCHASE INTENTION: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM VIETNAMESE GEN Z CONSUMERS

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Abstract: *Based on the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) framework, this study investigates the roles of moral norm and need for status as two important antecedents of green purchase intention among Gen Z consumers in Vietnam. Data were collected from a quantitative survey of 426 urban Gen Z consumers conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam. PLS-SEM was employed to test the proposed model and hypotheses. The results show that all five hypotheses received support from the data, confirming the roles of moral norm and need for status in predicting attitude and purchase intention. Moral norm was found to be a stronger predictor compared need for status. This study contributes to the extant literature by enriching our knowledge of the interesting and important relationships between moral norm and need for status, and their influence toward green purchase intention of Gen Z consumers in Vietnam. Further implications for fostering green purchase among younger Vietnamese consumers are subsequently discussed.*

• Keywords: *green purchase intention, moral norm, need for status, gen Z, Vietnam.*

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1. Introduction

As the world grapples with increasingly severe environmental disasters and pollution that profoundly impact communities, markets, consumers, and ecosystems, environmental concern has consequently captured significant attention from both academicians and practitioners worldwide. However, past research on pro-environmental consumption has primarily focused on developed countries, leaving developing countries largely underrepresented, especially in Asian contexts (Nguyen 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a clear need for further study to gain a better understanding of this important consumption behavior, specifically in emerging economies like Vietnam, which is currently experiencing significant economic growth accompanied by environmental degradation.

In these countries, Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) is a pivotal demographic in global environmental protection. Recognized for their heightened awareness and responsibility toward environmental issues, these young, well-educated consumers are more open to embracing innovative concepts like sustainable or eco-friendly consumption practices and (Joshi and Rahman, 2017). In Vietnam, Gen Z consumers are increasingly informed about sustainable and responsible consumption practices, thanks to greater access to environmental education, social media, and

international sustainability trends. Given Gen Z's role as a growing key consumer segment in Vietnam, they are expected to play a leading role in the adoption of green purchase behavior.

While prior research has explored various aspects of green purchase intention and behavior among Gen Z consumers, there are several phenomena remain underexplored or show inconsistent findings. For example, green purchase behavior is often considered to be strongly influenced by a sense of normative moral obligation, typically framed in terms of social responsibility and the avoidance of negative consequences (Barbarossa & De Pelsmacker, 2016; Liu et al., 2020). However, Arvola et al. (2008) empirically demonstrated that behavior guided by moral norms can also be motivated by positive experience. This highlights the need to re-examine moral motivations not only as obligations but also as potential sources of personal fulfillment. Secondly, the role of status motivation in green purchase is controversy and inconsistent in literature. While some consumers purchase green products under concern for the environment or driven by personal values such as altruism or biospheric concern, other consumers engage in green purchase primarily to signal their status without any regard to the environment (Nguyen, 2019) or view trendy green products as a means to display

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success (Nguyen et al., 2019). This suggests that status should not only be viewed as a behavioral motive or external driver but also as an underlying personal value that can shape green purchase behavior. Furthermore, this relationship appears to be context-dependent, particularly concerning a region's developmental level (Nguyen, 2019). Since prior research on green consumption often focuses on developed contexts or general populations (Fatema, 2024) there should be further investigation into how socio-symbolic motivations influence green purchase intentions among Gen Z consumers in emerging markets. To address these identified gaps, this study will use the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) framework to empirically investigate the influence of moral norm (from the perspective of a positive experience) and status need on the behavioral intention to purchase green products among Gen Z consumers in Vietnam.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

Theoretical framework

Green consumption refers to purchasing decisions and consumption behaviors that aim to minimize negative environmental impact and support sustainable production and consumption patterns. This includes opting for products that are biodegradable, recyclable, energy-efficient, ethically sourced, or manufactured with minimal environmental harm. Different theoretical frameworks, such as the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), have been employed to explore this behavior. While these models have significantly advanced our understanding of pro-environmental actions, they often prioritize cognitive and rational drivers and overlooking the symbolic or personally motivated factors increasingly shaping consumer decisions (Fatema, 2024). With green consumption becoming more tied to identity and lifestyle, scholars have highlighted the importance of examining its value and status signaling functions (Elliott, 2013; Huh and Kim 2024).

In order to examine green behavior under the perspective of value-oriented behavior, this study chose the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB), another prominent theoretical model used to understand pro-environmental behavior, as the theoretical framework. The VAB framework was proposed by Homer and Kahle (1988) to describe the cognitive hierarchy between value, attitude, and behavior. In this framework, values represent beliefs about what is important in life, such as altruism, biospheric concern, or egoistic interests. Attitudes reflect a person's positive or negative evaluation of specific behaviors, such as purchasing green products. Finally, behavior

is the actual action taken, such as buying eco-friendly goods or engaging in recycling. This model has been widely applied to explain why consumers engage in green consumption, highlighting the importance of underlying value orientations such as environmental concern or social responsibility (Schwartz, 1992; Segev and Liu, 2022).

With its root in social psychology, VAB framework suggests that personal values (e.g., altruistic, biospheric, egoistic) guide the formation of attitudes toward green products or sustainable practices, which in turn influence behavior. For example, consumers with strong biospheric values tend to develop positive attitudes toward sustainable products, which increase their likelihood of green purchasing. In this study, we argue that moral norm and need for status are also personal value that not only directly affect green purchase intention but also can both guide attitude toward such behavior. Specifically, green consumption in Vietnam is influenced by deeply held personal moral norms, which function as a core value guiding their beliefs and behaviors. These moral norms represent an internalized sense of duty, responsibility, and what is inherently "right" regarding environmental stewardship. Drawing upon theories of human values (Schwartz, 1992), these moral considerations can be rooted in universalism or benevolent values, emphasizing concern for the welfare of all people and nature. For Gen Z, who often exhibit heightened awareness of social and environmental justice, acting in an environmentally responsible manner is not just a cognitive decision but also stems from a fundamental conviction about their ethical obligation to protect the planet and contribute positively to society. This value, therefore, directly shapes their attitudes towards green products (e.g., "it is good to buy eco-friendly items") and, in turn, influences their green purchase intention. With regards to need for status, in contemporary society, particularly among younger generations, consumption choices often serve as powerful signals of identity, affiliation, and aspiration (Elliott, 2013). The desire to be perceived as modern, progressive, socially conscious, or even economically discerning can also be an ingrained personal value, aligning with self-enhancement values such as achievement and power in value frameworks (Schwartz, 1992). For Gen Z, who are highly connected and often express themselves through their consumption, acquiring green products can fulfill this intrinsic need for status by conferring social prestige, demonstrating ethical alignment, or indicating a desirable lifestyle (Huh & Kim, 2024). This value, therefore, forms the basis for positive attitudes towards green products (e.g., "buying this makes me look good/responsible") and subsequently

drives their green purchase intention. Thus, in our study, the construct of moral norm and need for status are integrated into VAB framework as the factor driving Gen Z's green purchase intention.

Hypothesis development

Attitude is defined as a person's positive or negative assessment of carrying out a specific action (Ajzen, 1991). When applied to green purchase, this refers to how favorably or unfavorably an individual views purchasing environmentally friendly products, often influenced by perceived advantages like improved health, safety, and reduced ecological footprint. Numerous studies have consistently confirmed that a positive attitude toward environment friendly purchase significantly predicts green purchase intention, including those studies in Asia (Joshi and Rahman, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019). The impact of attitude on intention to purchase has been established through extant literature, but the impact magnitudes of attitude have been inconsistent and dependent on the specific research context. In this study, we re-test the relationship between attitude and purchase intention toward green products among Gen Z consumers in the context of Vietnam, an emerging economy in Southeast Asia. We expect to see similar findings pertaining to the significantly positive impact on purchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H1: Attitude toward green purchase is positively related to green purchase intention among Vietnamese Gen Z consumers.

Moral norm is defined as an individual's conviction that acting in a certain way is inherently right or wrong regardless of their personal or social consequences. It refers to internalized norms and values of important others, representing each person's own views about right and wrong learned during life (Schwartz, 1992). Moral norms are often operationalized as perceived moral obligation and have been used interchangeably with personal norms and moral obligation in literature (Arvola et al., 2008). What distinguishes moral norms is that the consequences of violating or upholding them are tied to one's self-concept. Schwartz (1992) said that moral norm expresses individual values and refers to internalized feelings of personal obligation to act in a certain way, often to avoid guilt. In the area of environmental research, moral norm has been considered an important antecedent of environment-friendly purchase behavior, with several previous studies integrated moral norm into their research models (Arvola et al., 2008; Thøgersen and Ölander, 2006). In other studies, moral norm was also found to have an indirect impact on intention through attitude (Liu et al., 2020). While the extant literature acknowledges the significant impact of moral norm on

environmentally friendly purchases, research has not sufficiently investigated its positive aspect. Past studies predominantly conceptualized moral norm as a moral obligation, focusing on anticipated negative feelings arising from non-adherence to one's moral principles or ethical duties (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2006). On the other hand, a study by Arvola et al. (2008) is one of the very few that have examined the positive aspect of the moral norm rather than as negative feelings of obligation or guilt, focused on the positive self-enhancing feelings of doing the right thing. We argue that in the context of young Vietnamese consumers, examining the role of moral norm (i.e., consumers' positive and self-rewarding feelings associated with purchasing green products) is appropriate since the moral aspects related to green purchases are more likely to evoke positive than negative feelings.

Beyond shaping attitudes, moral norms are also recognized as direct drivers of pro-environmental and ethical behaviors. Previous research suggested that moral norm plays the role of a driving factor in explaining pro-environmental behaviors (Barbarossa and De Pelsmacker, 2016; Liu et al., 2020) or highlight their role as a direct predictor of purchase intention (Chen, 2016). Moral norms often mediate the relationship between social norms (which are stronger in collectivist cultures) and behavioral intentions (Arvola et al. 2008, Liu et al., 2019), which means it can be a predictor of pro-environmental and ethical behaviors. Le et al. (2019) in a research on consumers in urban Vietnam market shows that collectivistic consumers strongly emphasized the environmental consequence of their purchase decisions. Thus, it is expected that moral norm has both direct and indirect impact (through attitude) on purchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H2: Moral norm is positively related to a) attitude toward green purchase and b) green purchase intention for Vietnamese Gen Z consumers.

Eastman et al. (1999) defined need for status as the motivational process through which individuals strive to elevate their social standing by acquiring consumer products that symbolize status, both for themselves and for those in their social circles. Studies by Griskevicius et al. (2010) suggest that green products, especially when priced higher and purchased in public settings, can serve as symbols of distinction, allowing individuals to simultaneously demonstrate pro-environmental commitment and elevate their social standing. Thus, activating status motives can lead individuals to favor green products over more luxurious, non-green alternatives. This aligns with the idea that attitudes toward green products may be positively shaped when such products carry symbolic and reputational value.

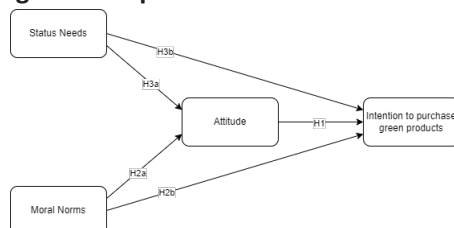
In Vietnam, a study by Nguyen and Tambyah (2017) reveal that factors such as material success orientation, materialism (particularly its success component), and individualism among urban consumers contribute to the prevalence of status consumption, providing them a sense of satisfaction. Despite the collectivist nature of Vietnamese society, the research reveals a high degree of individualism among urban consumers, who often perceive material possessions as indicators of success and achievement. Thus, it is expected that status-oriented individuals, especially among Gen Z, will develop more favorable attitudes toward green purchases when they perceive such products as both environmentally responsible and socially distinctive.

Besides affecting attitudes, the need for status also plays a direct role in influencing purchase intentions. Individuals with a strong desire for social recognition and admiration are more inclined to engage in status consumption, including the acquisition of products that signal prestige and social standing. In emerging markets such as Vietnam, status consumption is particularly salient, as consumers often use material goods to project success, sophistication, and alignment with global, modern lifestyles (Nguyen and Tambyah, 2011). Here, green products are often limited in availability, relatively high in price, and primarily distributed in urban areas, and thus can be seen as status product. Therefore, we argue that Gen Z individuals with strong status needs are more likely to intend to purchase green products, as doing so enhances both their social image and self-concept. While need for status is a universal human motive, individual differences in terms of motivation can lead to varied status-seeking behaviors, including materialistic consumption. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H3: Status need is positively related to a) attitude toward green purchase and b) green purchase intention for Vietnamese Gen Z consumers.

The proposed hypotheses are summarized in the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Proposed Research Framework



3. Methodology

Measurement

For this study, data from Gen Z consumers in Hanoi and the surrounding urban areas were collected because their conditions (such as high living conditions

and green product availability) are favorable for green consumption (Nguyen et al., 2019). To serve the purpose of data collection, our questionnaire was developed including all the scale items measuring the four constructs in the research model. Specifically, the three-item scale measuring attitude was developed based on Ajzen (1991) (e.g., ‘purchase of green products is a smart choice’), and the three-item scale measuring purchase intention was adapted from Chan (2001) (e.g., ‘I will consider buying less polluted products’). The scale measuring moral norm was adopted from Arvola et al. (2008) and included three items (e.g., ‘buying green products instead of conventional products would feel like making a personal contribution to something better’). To measure need for status, we adopted a 5-item status consumption scale developed by Eastman et al. (1999). All the scale items are scored on a 7-point Likert-type format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

To ensure a common understanding among respondents, the definition of green products was provided at the beginning of the questionnaire. The original English items underwent a back-translation process to ensure semantic consistency in Vietnamese. A pilot study was then carried out with a small sample of Gen Z consumers, and their feedback was used to refine the questionnaire for clarity and relevance.

Data collection and analysis

Participants were approached via online survey and supermarket intercepts. Research assistants were instructed to distribute the paper version of the questionnaire in the major supermarkets in Hanoi, Hung Yen, and Ninh Binh. The online survey was posted on Gen Z-related Facebook groups for maximum exposure. The collected paper questionnaires were then screened for missing data and validity to filter out non-valid responses before being merged with the online data.

After screening, we collected 426 valid responses. All respondents belong to Gen Z, from 18 to 27 years old (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2020). The average age is 20.7. The sample covers a wide range of income levels, with nearly half of the respondents earn more than 10 million per month, and a small percentage earning above the 18-million level. The data was analyzed via conducting partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was chosen due to its superior ability to handle data without normal distribution and small sample sizes. We followed Hair et al. (2019)’s suggested procedure, which include reliability and validity of the measurement assessment and structural model assessment, followed by a bootstrapping to examine the path coefficients. The analysis was run on SmartPLS3 software.

4. Results and discussion

Measurement model assessment

For the validity and reliability of the measurement model, we first examine the outer loadings of the observed variables. One item (att4) was removed due to low loading, under the suggested minimum value of 0.7. After restarting, all latent constructs score above 0.5 for AVE, establishing convergence validity. Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and Composite reliability were all above the required values of 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5. Table 1 illustrates the results of validity and reliability check.

Table 1. Reliability of measurement

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
attitude	0.855	0.859	0.912	0.775
int	0.766	0.774	0.866	0.683
moral norm	0.886	0.887	0.929	0.814
status need	0.84	0.846	0.893	0.676

To assess the discriminant validity, we looked at the values of the Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio between the latent constructs. All HTMT values are below the 0.9 threshold, establishing discriminant validity issues. Table 2 illustrates the detailed ratios between constructs.

Table 2. Discriminant validity

	attitude	int	moral norm	status need
attitude				
int	0.675			
moral norm	0.688	0.688		
status need	0.372	0.441	0.463	

Structural model assessment

After establishing the validity of the measurement model, we assessed the structural model. First, we looked for collinearity issues. Inner VIF values were all below the threshold value of 3.3, eliminating the threat of collinearity. In-sample explanatory was evaluated with R Square and Q Square. The results indicate moderate predictive relevance of the endogenous constructs, with R square at 0.367 and 0.404, and Q Square at 0.279 and 0.270 for Attitude and Intention, respectively. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Structural model assessment

	R ²	Q ²
attitude	0.367	0.279
intention	0.404	0.270

Hypothesis testing

To assess the path coefficients, we performed the bootstrapping with 5000 sub-samples at 0.05 significant level. Detailed hypotheses test results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Hypothesis Test

Structural relationship	Path Coefficients	f ²	P-value	Hypothesis	Results
Attitude > Intention	0.306	0.1	0.000	H1	Supported
Moral norm > Attitude	0.564	0.423	0.000	H2a	Supported
Moral norm > Intention	0.335	0.112	0.002	H2b	Supported
Status needs > Attitude	0.091	0.011	0.034	H3a	Supported
Status needs > Intention	0.126	0.022	0.012	H3b	Supported

In this study, five hypotheses were tested. The obtained path coefficients confirmed all proposed hypotheses. The direct effect of Attitude on Intention (H1) was supported with p-value <0.05 and coeff. =0.306. Moral norm significantly influenced both Attitude and Intention, with p-value <0.05 and coeff. =0.564 and 0.335, respectively. H2a and H2b, therefore, were supported. Moral norm' effect size, as indicated by f square, was surprisingly large, at 0.423 for Attitude. However, its direct impact on intention was quite small, with f square =0.112. Finally, status needs were found to exert a significant positive influence on Attitude and Intention, with p-values =0.034 and 0.012, coeff. =0.091 and 0.126, respectively. H3a and H3b were supported. While being statistically significant, the effect size of Status needs on Attitude and Intention was small, especially on the former, at f² =0.011.

Discussion

From the results, all five hypotheses are supported. Similar to previous studies, Attitude is a significant predictor of intention to purchase green products (Nguyen et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2019). However, its moderate effect formed an interesting reversed situation compared to a previous cross-cultural study (Nguyen, 2019), whereas Attitude was the most salient in previous studies on Vietnamese consumers but relatively weak for the Taiwanese, a more developed country. It provided support for Nguyen (2019)'s assertion that attitude lost its importance as the economy developed.

As expected, the findings provided empirical evidence to support the significant positive impact of Moral norm on Attitude and Intention to purchase green products. This means that the positive feelings related to the moral aspect of green purchases are likely to lead to a similarly positive attitude, and a favorable intention to purchase. While previous studies addressed moral norm from a dominantly negative aspect, such as guilt or bad consequences (Barbarossa and De Pelsmacker, 2016; Thøgersen and O'lander, 2006), the results of this study contributed to the literature by investigating moral norm from the positive aspect, extending the findings of Arvola et al. (2008) in an emerging economy.

Interestingly, the significant positive impact of Status needs on Attitude and Intention to purchase green products contradicts Nguyen (2019)'s findings on the insignificant effect of materialism on green consumption in Taiwan, while mirroring the Attitude's effect. More specifically, green products were suggested to be unrelated to success and luxury in developed markets (Nguyen, 2019). However, in less developed markets, green products are expensive and associated with materialistic values (Nguyen et al., 2019). Considering that the temporal gap between these

studies is more than 5 years, the results indicate a slow but certain progression of consumers' values from the emerging economic stage to a more developed stage.

From a theoretical perspective, the current study's findings enrich our understanding of green consumption in an emerging economy. They provide empirical evidence that consumers in developing countries are different to their counterparts in more developed countries because of the local socioeconomic conditions. As the economy develops, their values tend to move closer to those in a further development stage. This process is slow and follows incremental progression, like how the current study found a similarity in Attitude and moral norm, but a contradiction in Status needs.

From a managerial perspective, building a favorable attitude toward green products is still very relevant for organizations doing business in this area. However, the main focus should be on moral norm, as to relocate their marketing activities of green products to consumers with a high moral norm standing. More specifically, these activities are suggested to feature and induce positive feelings associated with the consumption or usage of green products. Green products therefore should be designed in a way that brings the consumers a sense of comfort or pleasure when purchasing and using. Organizations wanting to improve their performance can also tackle the intention and attitude by providing a sense of superior status related. The needs for status, as their desire to be seen as better, are statistically significant in predicting Intention and Attitude. Thus, organizations can provide green products but be promoted as a higher, more status-induce consumption to attract Gen Z's customers. However, since their effect was small, their efficiency was very low. So, investing too much in this aspect will not bring the desired outcome, or it will be too costly. On the other hand, the observed trend of development in Vietnam, as highlighted in the previous section, indicates that any substantial investment would be very likely to be outdated.

There are still limitations in this study that can be improved in subsequent studies. Firstly, due to the limitation of resources, convenience sampling was the chosen approach, which limits the generality of the results. Therefore, future studies can address representativeness by conducting a probabilistic sampling method, including more rural areas and non-Gen Z consumers. Secondly, since previous studies on Taiwanese consumers provide a nice context to highlight the findings, more attempts should be made to compare the two countries directly. The difference in development, combined with the previous data on green consumption, should provide very interesting

insights as to how consumers' values and behaviors change over time and amidst economic development.

5. Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of green purchase intention among Vietnamese Gen Z consumers by applying the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) framework and incorporating two contextually relevant predictors: moral norm and need for status. The results highlight that moral norm is a strong driver of both attitude and intention, emphasizing the positive, self-fulfilling role of ethical conviction in green consumption. While the need for status also influences green purchase, its effect is smaller, suggesting that symbolic aspirations play a role but are secondary to moral motivations. These findings offer both theoretical and practical insights, encouraging marketers to frame green products as ethically rewarding and socially meaningful choices for younger consumers in emerging markets.

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