

Behavioral Pricing of Sustainable Consumer Products

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Abstract

The market expansion of sustainable consumer products depends not only on environmental attitudes but also on how consumers interpret the economic sacrifice associated with greener alternatives. Products carrying environmental certifications, lower-impact materials, responsible sourcing claims, improved durability, or reduced resource consumption may command price premiums; however, willingness to accept those premiums is influenced by perceived fairness, reference prices, claim credibility, expected functional value, and the way sustainability benefits are communicated.

This study investigates behavioral pricing as a mechanism for aligning sustainable product value with consumer price perceptions while distinguishing transparent value communication from manipulative price framing. Because no verified consumer dataset was supplied, the article adopts a reproducible simulation-based research design involving 160 synthetic product evaluations distributed equally across four pricing architectures: price parity with a basic eco-label, a 6% premium supported by certified environmental impact, an 11% premium supported by lifecycle-value information, and a 20% premium supported only by a generic green appeal.

The analytical model incorporates claim credibility, perceived sustainable value, perceived price fairness, and purchase intention. The simulated results show a strong positive association between perceived price fairness and purchase intention ($r = 0.814$). Mean purchase intention was 73.4 under price parity, 69.7 for the certified 6% premium, 70.4 for the lifecycle-framed 11% premium, and only 45.5 for the high-premium generic-green condition.

The findings illustrate that consumers may accept a moderate sustainable-product premium when the additional cost is accompanied by credible, verifiable, and economically interpretable benefits. Behavioral pricing therefore appears most defensible when it clarifies value rather than obscures cost. The paper proposes a fairness-centered pricing framework combining transparent reference prices, credible sustainability information, realistic premiums, lifecycle-value communication, and avoidance of exaggerated environmental or savings claims.

Keywords: behavioral pricing; sustainable consumer products; green price premium; perceived price fairness; sustainable consumption; eco-label credibility; reference pricing; willingness to pay; purchase intention

1. Introduction

Sustainable consumption has become an important field of marketing and consumer research because environmental concern does not automatically produce corresponding marketplace behavior. Consumers routinely evaluate sustainability alongside price, convenience, quality, habits, perceived effectiveness, product availability, and social influences. White, Habib, and Hardisty's SHIFT framework identifies social influence, habit formation, individual self, feelings and cognition, and tangibility as important mechanisms through which sustainable consumer behavior may be encouraged. Their synthesis illustrates why environmental information alone is frequently insufficient to alter consumer choice.

Price is particularly significant because it transforms an abstract environmental preference into an immediate economic trade-off. Earlier work by Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo showed that a segment of consumers was willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products, while later experimental research has demonstrated measurable willingness to pay for particular eco-labeled products. These findings establish that sustainable attributes can possess economic value for consumers, but they do not support the assumption that an unlimited or standardized green premium will be accepted across products and consumer segments. Willingness to pay remains heterogeneous and context dependent.

Behavioral pricing provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding this heterogeneity because consumers do not evaluate price as an isolated numerical fact. Reference points influence price judgments, perceived savings, and offer evaluations. Urbany, Bearden, and Weilbaker demonstrated experimentally that seller-provided reference-price information influenced consumers' estimates of regular prices and perceived offer value. Behavioral-pricing scholarship has subsequently continued to recognize reference prices as an important mechanism shaping price perception. Sustainable-product premiums may therefore be interpreted differently depending on the reference alternative, the credibility of the comparison, and whether consumers understand what additional value the higher price represents.

The perceived value of sustainable attributes provides another important mechanism. De Medeiros, Ribeiro, and Cortimiglia found that perceived green-product value was positively associated with willingness to pay and purchasing decisions. Eco-label studies similarly demonstrate that sustainability labels can influence preference and willingness to pay, although their effects depend on the type, credibility, and presentation of the information provided. Van Loo and colleagues observed distinct willingness-to-pay responses to different coffee sustainability labels, while Rihn, Wei, and Khachatryan found that eco-label format influenced visual attention and willingness to pay. These findings suggest that a price premium becomes behaviorally meaningful only when consumers recognize and trust the value it is intended to represent.

The present study therefore examines Behavioral Pricing of Sustainable Consumer Products through the interaction of price premium, sustainability credibility, perceived value, and price fairness. Unlike approaches that ask simply how much extra consumers will pay for a green product, this paper asks under what pricing architecture a premium remains understandable and fair. A simulation-based analytical design is used because verified consumer-choice data were not supplied. The study explicitly distinguishes legitimate value framing—such as verified environmental certification or realistic

lifecycle-cost information—from manipulative framing that attempts to justify a large premium through generic environmental language without sufficient evidence.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Sustainable Price Premiums Through a Behavioral-Pricing Perspective

The first objective is to examine how consumers may interpret different sustainable-product price premiums relative to their perceived environmental and functional value. Traditional economic reasoning predicts that, other things being equal, increasing price should reduce demand. Sustainable products complicate this relationship because an additional price may be interpreted as payment for improved environmental performance, certification, ethical sourcing, greater durability, reduced waste, or some other attribute valued by the consumer.

Research on green purchase behavior demonstrates that price interacts with multiple psychological and contextual variables rather than operating independently. Joshi and Rahman's review identified a diverse set of factors influencing green purchasing, while Laroche and colleagues showed that willingness to accept additional cost differs among consumer groups. The present study therefore analyzes premium size alongside perceived price fairness instead of treating the nominal premium as a sufficient explanation of purchasing behavior

2.2 To Evaluate Credible Environmental and Lifecycle Value Framing

The second objective is to examine whether moderate sustainable premiums can remain acceptable when consumers receive credible explanations of the value supporting the additional price. Two forms are distinguished. Certified-impact framing provides externally credible environmental information, while lifecycle-value framing explains how durability, energy efficiency, reduced replacement requirements, repairability, or other use-phase benefits may affect total value over time.

This distinction is important because perceived green value has been linked with willingness to pay, while experimental eco-label research demonstrates that credible environmental signals can influence choice. Behavioral pricing in this context should therefore not be designed to make an expensive product merely appear inexpensive. Its more legitimate function is to provide an economically understandable account of why two apparently similar products may command different prices.

2.3 To Develop a Fairness-Centered Behavioral Pricing Framework

The third objective is to distinguish responsible behavioral pricing from deceptive anchoring or green-price manipulation. Reference-price research demonstrates that consumers' judgments can be affected by seller-provided comparison prices, including exaggerated comparisons. Consequently, sustainable marketers possess a responsibility to ensure that the reference alternatives used in price communication are commercially realistic.

A fairness-centered pricing framework should preserve consumers' ability to evaluate the genuine sacrifice involved. It therefore requires realistic comparison prices, verifiable environmental benefits, clarity concerning premium magnitude, appropriate distinction between purchase price and lifecycle cost, and avoidance of unsupported claims that higher prices are inherently evidence of greater

sustainability. Sustainable value must justify the premium; behavioral techniques should not be used to hide a weak underlying value proposition.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Green Purchase Decisions, Price Sensitivity, and Willingness to Pay

Green-purchase research consistently demonstrates that environmentally preferable consumption is influenced by multiple individual and market conditions. Joshi and Rahman's review identified environmental concern, product attributes, social influence, perceived consumer effectiveness, price, availability, and other factors as relevant to green purchase behavior. The literature therefore challenges simple interpretations in which consumers either possess or lack a stable willingness to purchase sustainably.

Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo provided important early evidence regarding consumers willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products. Their research identified distinguishable demographic, psychological, and behavioral characteristics among consumers willing to accept higher green prices. Thøgersen, Jørgensen, and Sandager later examined decision making concerning a green everyday product and emphasized that adding an environmentally friendly attribute can change how consumers process a routine choice. These studies collectively indicate that sustainable pricing needs to account for heterogeneous decision processes rather than relying on a single universal green premium.

Experimental evidence provides an important methodological complement to stated preferences. Higgins, Hutchinson, and Longo used an experimental auction to investigate willingness to pay for eco-labeled forest products and identified a positive premium in their particular setting. Such incentive-compatible approaches are useful because hypothetical willingness-to-pay statements may overstate the amount consumers actually sacrifice when real money is involved. Future validation of the present simulation should consequently include real-choice or experimentally consequential pricing decisions.

3.2 Reference Prices, Mental Accounting, and Perceived Fairness

Behavioral pricing research shows that consumers form judgments through comparisons with internal or externally supplied reference prices. Urbany, Bearden, and Weilbaker found that plausible seller-provided regular prices increased perceived offer value compared with conditions where no reference price was supplied. They also demonstrated why exaggerated reference-price claims require ethical scrutiny: consumer perception can respond to anchors even when those anchors are questionable.

Mental-accounting theory provides a related explanation for why identical monetary amounts can be interpreted differently depending on their psychological categorization. Thaler's foundational work proposed that consumers organize economic outcomes through mental accounts rather than treating all expenditure as perfectly fungible, and subsequent consumer research has continued to demonstrate the relevance of budgeting and opportunity-cost consideration to purchase decisions. For sustainable products, a premium can therefore be interpreted either as an additional purchase cost or as an investment in attributes such as reduced operating expense, product durability, environmental quality, or alignment with personal values.

Perceived fairness can operate as the bridge between these perspectives. A premium may be objectively modest but still be rejected when the consumer cannot identify why it exists. Conversely, a larger premium may remain acceptable in specific categories when the environmental attribute is credible and the consumer perceives sufficient value. Behavioral pricing should therefore examine both economic magnitude and consumer interpretation.

3.3 Eco-Labels, Credibility, and Sustainable Value

Eco-labels reduce information complexity by translating environmental attributes into recognizable marketplace signals. Van Loo and colleagues found that different coffee sustainability labels produced different willingness-to-pay estimates, showing that "sustainability" is not interpreted as a single generic attribute. Rihn, Wei, and Khachatryan similarly found that the visual format of eco-label information affected attention and willingness to pay in an experimental-auction setting.

The implication is that the credibility of the environmental claim can influence whether consumers interpret the higher price as justified. A certified claim can reduce uncertainty by providing information beyond a firm's self-description. A generic statement such as "better for the planet," by contrast, may convey substantially less diagnostic information unless it is linked to an identifiable environmental attribute.

Perceived value further connects sustainability information to pricing. De Medeiros and colleagues found that perceived green-product value increased willingness to pay within their study. The present framework consequently treats claim credibility, perceived sustainable value, and price fairness as separate but related constructs. This permits a premium to be rejected not simply because it is high, but because consumers may consider the supporting evidence insufficient.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Simulated Choice Architecture

The study adopts a quantitative simulation-based research design. No actual consumer respondents, companies, brands, product categories, prices, certification bodies, or purchase transactions are represented in the numerical analysis. Simulation was selected because no verified primary dataset was supplied. Accordingly, all numerical findings are analytical illustrations rather than claims about observed consumer behavior.

A reproducible synthetic corpus of 160 consumer-product evaluations was generated using a fixed random seed. Forty simulated evaluations were assigned to each of four pricing architectures: Price Parity + Basic Eco-Label, 6% Premium + Certified Impact, 11% Premium + Lifecycle Value, and 20% Premium + Generic Green Appeal.

The model incorporates Claim Credibility, Perceived Sustainable Value, Perceived Price Fairness, and Purchase Intention. The four conditions were constructed to distinguish premium magnitude from the informational quality of its justification. The lifecycle-value condition, for example, carries a higher premium than the certification condition but provides economically interpretable information intended to support the value proposition.

4.2 Proposed Consumer Measurement Instrument

Future empirical validation should assess consumers' perceptions after exposure to experimentally controlled sustainable-product price presentations. The following questionnaire contains exactly five proposed items. These statements were not administered to actual consumers and should be pilot tested before substantive field use.

Table 1: Proposed Measurement Instrument for Behavioral Sustainable Pricing

Item	Construct	Proposed Questionnaire Statement	Measurement Purpose
Q1	Premium acceptance	The additional price charged for this sustainable product appears reasonable compared with the conventional alternative.	Measures premium tolerance
Q2	Price fairness	The price difference reflects a fair exchange between what I pay and the sustainability benefits I receive.	Measures perceived fairness
Q3	Claim credibility	The environmental information used to justify the product's price appears specific and trustworthy.	Measures credibility
Q4	Sustainable value	The product's environmental, durability, efficiency, or lifecycle benefits provide meaningful additional value.	Measures perceived sustainable value
Q5	Purchase intention	At the price shown, I would seriously consider purchasing the sustainable product.	Measures behavioral intention

A future experimental design should additionally measure household income, baseline environmental concern, product involvement, prior eco-label familiarity, price sensitivity, and conventional reference-price expectations. Real purchase or experimental-auction methods would further strengthen external validity because earlier eco-label research demonstrates that financially consequential designs can measure willingness to pay more rigorously than hypothetical intention alone.

4.3 Simulation and Analytical Procedure

Claim Credibility, Perceived Price Fairness, Perceived Sustainable Value, and Purchase Intention were simulated on 0–100 scales. Credibility was modeled most strongly for the certified-impact and lifecycle-value conditions and weakest for the generic-green condition. The high-premium generic condition was intentionally constructed to test whether environmental positioning alone can compensate for a large price differential when specific supporting value is limited.

Pearson correlation was calculated between Perceived Price Fairness and Purchase Intention. Because the observations were generated from an explicit simulation model, this coefficient should be understood only as a descriptive feature of the constructed analytical framework.

Group means were subsequently compared across the four pricing architectures. The principal analytical question was whether moderate premiums supported by credible sustainability information could preserve purchase intention at levels reasonably close to a price-parity product.

5. Analysis

5.1 Comparison of Sustainable Pricing Architectures

The results show that price parity produces the highest mean Purchase Intention at 73.4, accompanied by a Perceived Price Fairness score of 77.6. This result establishes the expected economic baseline: removing the price sacrifice makes sustainable attributes easier for consumers to select.

The 6% Premium + Certified Impact condition produces a lower but still comparatively strong Purchase Intention score of 69.7. Claim Credibility is particularly high at 82.3, suggesting that a modest premium may remain acceptable where environmental performance is presented through credible certification.

The 11% Premium + Lifecycle Value condition generates a Purchase Intention score of 70.4, marginally above the lower 6% premium condition despite its higher upfront cost. The interpretation is not that an 11% premium is universally optimal. Instead, the constructed model illustrates how consumers may interpret a larger initial expenditure more favorably when information explains longer-term functional or economic value.

Table 2: Simulated Consumer Responses Across Sustainable Pricing Architectures

Pricing Architecture	Simulated Cases	Price Premium	Mean Claim Credibility	Mean Price Fairness	Mean Sustainable Value	Mean Purchase Intention
Price parity + basic eco-label	40	0%	66.7	77.6	71.3	73.4
6% premium + certified impact	40	6%	82.3	70.3	73.6	69.7
11% premium + lifecycle value	40	11%	80.4	71.1	70.3	70.4
20% premium + generic green appeal	40	20%	52.8	45.0	55.9	45.5

The high-premium condition performs substantially worse. A 20% Premium + Generic Green Appeal produces a Purchase Intention score of only 45.5, accompanied by Price Fairness of 45.0 and Claim Credibility of 52.8. Within the simulation, generic environmental positioning therefore fails to compensate for a large monetary sacrifice.

5.2 Perceived Price Fairness and Purchase Intention

Across the 160 simulated observations, Perceived Price Fairness and Purchase Intention generate a Pearson correlation of approximately $r = 0.814$. This strong positive relationship represents the central analytical result of the revised model.

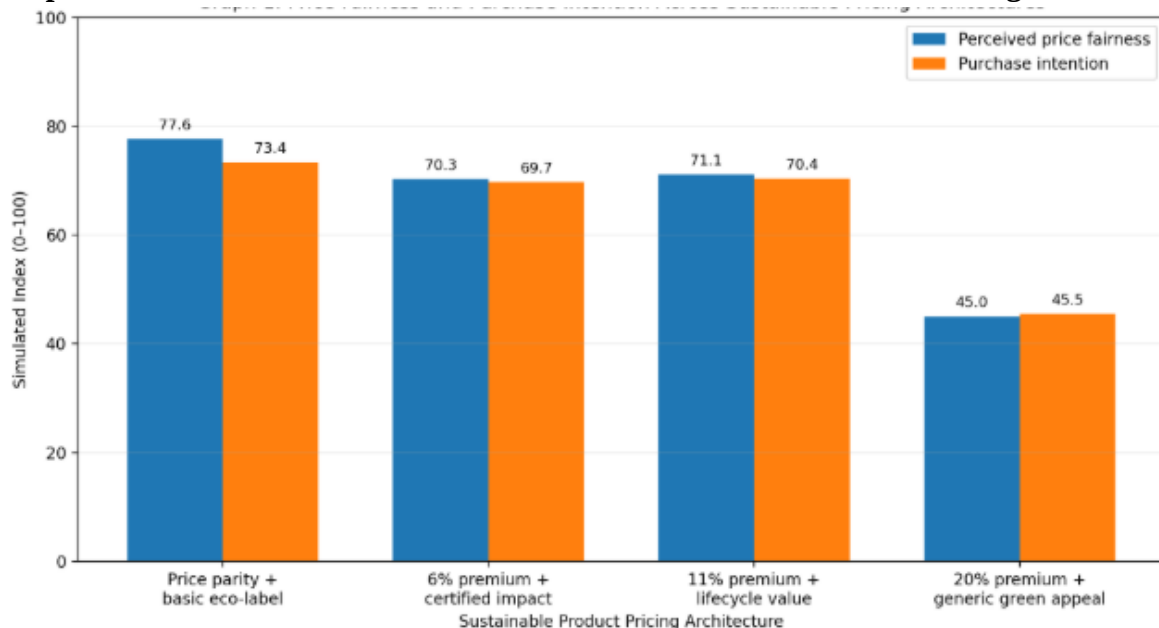
The result suggests that the behaviorally important question may not simply be “How high is the premium?” but rather “Does the consumer consider the premium justified?” A modest premium supported by transparent environmental certification and a moderately larger premium supported by credible lifecycle value both produce purchase-intention scores close to the price-parity condition.

This interpretation is consistent with earlier research demonstrating that perceived green value can influence willingness to pay and that credible sustainability labels can affect consumer valuation. It also aligns with behavioral-pricing evidence that contextual information and reference points influence perceived offer value.

5.3 Graphical Interpretation of Fairness-Centered Pricing

Graph 1 compares perceived price fairness and purchase intention under each sustainable pricing architecture.

Graph 1: Price Fairness and Purchase Intention Across Sustainable Pricing Architectures



The sharp decline in the 20% generic-green condition provides the more strategically important result. Behavioral framing does not remove economic constraints. A high price accompanied only by vague environmental positioning remains difficult to justify within the model. Sustainable brands should consequently avoid assuming that environmentally concerned consumers can be persuaded to absorb large premiums through general ecological language.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Green Premium Is Primarily a Fairness Problem

The first major implication is that sustainable pricing should not be reduced to identifying the maximum premium consumers are technically willing to pay. Such an approach can encourage firms to treat environmental concern as an opportunity for price extraction rather than value creation. The stronger strategic objective is to establish a premium that consumers regard as economically and ethically defensible.

The simulated comparison supports this interpretation. Moving from price parity to a modest certified premium reduces purchase intention only moderately, whereas the high generic-green premium generates a substantial decline. The difference reflects both price magnitude and justification quality. Research by de Medeiros and colleagues similarly demonstrates the relevance of perceived green value, while the willingness-to-pay literature shows that environmentally preferable characteristics can generate positive valuations under specific conditions.

Fairness is particularly important because consumers may suspect that environmental positioning is being used to justify unnecessary price inflation. Transparent information concerning materials, certification, production changes, longevity, resource efficiency, or other cost-generating improvements can therefore serve both informational and trust-building functions. The firm should explain why the sustainable alternative costs more without implying that every sustainability attribute must necessarily command a premium.

6.2 Lifecycle Framing Can Clarify Value but Should Not Conceal Upfront Cost

The second implication concerns lifecycle-value framing. Consumers frequently compare purchase prices even where products have different operating costs, replacement frequencies, maintenance requirements, or useful lives. Mental-accounting and opportunity-cost research indicates that consumers do not always integrate all relevant economic consequences automatically when making individual purchase decisions. Clear lifecycle information can therefore improve decision quality when it is realistic and understandable.

The simulated lifecycle condition demonstrates this possibility. Although the modeled premium increases to 11%, purchase intention remains around 70 because the additional price is connected with interpretable longer-term value. This should not be read as evidence that lifecycle framing universally permits an 11% premium. The actual relationship would vary substantially by product category and should be tested empirically.

Ethical constraints are essential. Firms should not present speculative future savings as guaranteed financial returns. Energy savings depend on usage intensity, durability depends on actual product construction, and replacement savings require realistic assumptions about competing products. Lifecycle pricing is responsible when assumptions are visible and defensible; it becomes manipulative when future savings are overstated to make the initial premium appear artificially small.

6.3 Eco-Label Credibility and Transparent Behavioral Pricing

The third implication concerns the role of credible sustainability information. Eco-label research shows that consumers assign different values to different certification systems and that label format can influence attention and willingness to pay. This makes certification potentially valuable in sustainable pricing because it provides evidence supporting the environmental component of the value proposition.

Yet labels should reduce information asymmetry rather than become decorative green cues. A general ecological symbol without a clear standard may create visual salience without providing adequate information. Behavioral pricing should therefore connect price communication with specific environmental attributes rather than relying on generalized green aesthetics.

Reference pricing requires equivalent discipline. Urbany and colleagues demonstrate that seller-provided reference prices can influence perceptions even when reference-price credibility is questionable. Sustainable brands should therefore use actual and representative conventional alternatives when communicating price differences. The responsible behavioral-pricing equation is not “make the premium look smaller” but rather “make the value and the true premium easier to evaluate.”

7. Conclusion

Behavioral pricing provides a useful framework for understanding why consumers may accept some sustainable-product premiums while rejecting others. Consumers do not evaluate price independently from environmental credibility, reference alternatives, perceived functional value, and fairness. Sustainable-product pricing is therefore both an economic and informational problem. A premium can be commercially viable when consumers understand what creates the additional value, but environmental concern does not eliminate fundamental price sensitivity.

The simulation developed in this study compares four pricing architectures and demonstrates a strong modeled association between Perceived Price Fairness and Purchase Intention ($r = 0.814$). Price parity achieves purchase intention of 73.4, while a 6% certified premium and an 11% lifecycle-value premium retain comparatively strong scores of 69.7 and 70.4 respectively. In contrast, a 20% premium supported only by generic environmental positioning produces substantially lower purchase intention of 45.5. These numerical findings are explicitly synthetic and must not be presented as measured consumer effects.

The principal contribution of the study is a fairness-centered behavioral pricing framework. Sustainable firms should begin with genuine product value, determine a commercially defensible premium, use credible sustainability evidence, communicate lifecycle benefits where they can be substantiated, and provide realistic reference-price comparisons. Behavioral principles can improve understanding of these attributes, but they should not be used to hide the true magnitude of the economic sacrifice.

Future empirical research should test the proposed framework through randomized price experiments, experimental auctions, discrete-choice models, field experiments, and actual retail transaction data. Research should compare percentage and absolute premiums, externally certified versus self-declared sustainability claims, upfront versus lifecycle pricing, high- and low-income consumer groups, and different product categories. The broader conclusion is that sustainable consumer

products are most likely to achieve durable market acceptance when firms make environmental value credible, economic value understandable, and the resulting price premium fair rather than merely persuasive.

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