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The Impact of Sustainable Business Practices on Consumer Purchase Decisions: The Mediating Role of Brand Image

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Abstract

Sustainability has become an increasingly important dimension of contemporary business strategy, yet the pathway through which business sustainability is translated into consumer purchase decisions remains insufficiently explained. This study develops and proposes an empirical model examining the effect of sustainable business practices on consumer purchase decisions and the mediating role of brand image. Sustainable business practices are conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing environmental, social, and ethical/responsible business practices. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) perspective, the study proposes that sustainable business practices operate as external signals, brand image represents consumers' internal evaluation of the brand, and purchase decision represents the resulting behavioral response. The proposed research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design targeting adult consumers in India. Data will be collected using a structured five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) or an equivalent SEM procedure, including reliability and validity assessment and bootstrapped mediation analysis. Recent evidence indicates that sustainable marketing can strengthen brand image and downstream customer outcomes, while India-focused studies demonstrate that sustainability-related attitudes, brand-related factors, and environmental considerations are relevant to green purchasing. The study therefore addresses a mechanism gap by examining brand image as the central explanatory bridge between sustainable business practices and purchase-related responses. Because primary survey data have not yet been supplied, this manuscript does not fabricate coefficients, significance levels, or hypothesis outcomes; the Results and Discussion sections are structured for completion after data collection. The proposed research contributes a context-specific framework for understanding how credible sustainability can create consumer value through brand image.

Keywords*: Sustainable Business Practices; Sustainability; Brand Image; Consumer Purchase Decisions; Purchase Intention; Sustainable Marketing; Stakeholder Theory; Stimulus–Organism–Response; India.*

INTRODUCTION

Corporate sustainability has moved beyond a narrow environmental concern and increasingly encompasses how firms manage environmental impacts, social responsibilities, ethical conduct, supply chains, and stakeholder relationships. At the global policy level, United Nations Sustainable Development

Goal 12 calls for responsible consumption and production and encourages businesses to adopt sustainable practices and integrate sustainability information into their reporting. OECD responsible-business-conduct guidance similarly emphasizes business impacts on people, planet, society, and supply chains and the importance of due diligence, mitigation, tracking, communication, and remediation (United Nations, 2026; OECD, 2026).

For firms, sustainability can create value through efficiency, risk management, innovation, differentiation, stakeholder relationships, and reputation. For consumers, however, sustainability is experienced indirectly through products, communications, brand associations, perceived credibility, and evaluations of corporate behavior. This distinction is important because positive attitudes toward sustainability do not automatically translate into purchase behavior. Recent research continues to identify a gap between environmental concern and actual sustainable consumption, indicating that consumer decisions are shaped by multiple psychological and market factors (Chan, 2025; Achiraqui et al., 2025).

Recent empirical studies provide growing support for the importance of brand-related mechanisms. Rastogi et al. (2024), for example, found that sustainable marketing practices positively influenced brand image and customer loyalty in India's consumer electronics sector, with brand image functioning as an intermediary. Jabeen and Khan (2023) also examined green marketing, corporate social responsibility, green purchase intention, and green brand image. More recent work in sustainable fashion and other consumer contexts continues to show that brand image can influence purchase-related outcomes and can operate alongside other mediating mechanisms (Achiraqui et al., 2025; Chan, 2025).

The India context is particularly relevant. Existing India-focused studies have examined green purchase decisions, sustainable apparel, green products, and environmental consumer behavior, but many use Theory of Planned Behavior or related individual-level variables rather than testing a broad sustainable-business-practice construct with brand image as a central mediator. For example, Niloy et al. (2023) used data from 441 urban Indiai respondents and found that attitude toward brand, perceived behavioral control, environmental concern, and digital communication were associated with green purchase intention. Mia et al. (2025) examined 2,625 digital-native customers in India and identified social and environmental sustainability consciousness among factors relevant to green-product purchase intention. These studies establish the importance of sustainability-related consumer behavior in India while leaving room for a firm-level, brand-mediated explanation (Hossen et al., 2026).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the literature generally reports positive associations between sustainability-related marketing or business practices and purchase-related outcomes, the explanatory mechanism remains fragmented. A large part of the literature concentrates on specific green marketing tools such as eco-labels, green packaging, green advertising, or green products. Other studies focus on consumer attitudes, environmental concern, social influence, trust, or purchase intention. This fragmentation makes it difficult to determine whether consumers respond to sustainability because of the practices themselves or because those practices improve the way consumers perceive the brand.

The problem is therefore both theoretical and managerial. From a theoretical perspective, a direct relationship between sustainable practices and purchase decisions does not fully explain the psychological process connecting corporate behavior with consumer response. From a managerial perspective, firms need to know whether sustainability investments strengthen the brand in a way that is capable of influencing customer choice. This question becomes even more important where consumers may be skeptical of sustainability claims or where price, quality, convenience, and product involvement compete with ethical considerations.

RESEARCH GAP

Mechanism gap: Previous research often emphasizes direct effects of green/sustainable practices on purchase intention, while fewer studies position overall brand image as the central mechanism connecting broader sustainable business practices with consumer purchase decisions.

Dimensional gap: Many studies focus primarily on environmental or green marketing activities. The proposed study incorporates environmental, social, and ethical/responsible practices within a broader sustainable-business construct.

Contextual gap: India has a growing body of research on green purchasing, but much of it is product-, demographic-, or TPB-focused. A brand-mediated model linking perceived business sustainability to purchase decisions remains comparatively underdeveloped.

Measurement gap: The original draft combined 'purchase decisions' with purchase intention and recommendation. The final study must explicitly define the outcome as consumer purchase decision intention/choice-related response unless actual transaction data are collected.

Methodological gap: The study should distinguish the measurement model from the structural model, justify whether sustainable business practices are reflective or formative, address common-method bias, and use bootstrapped indirect effects rather than relying only on the traditional 'full versus partial mediation' rule.

Research Aim

To examine the impact of sustainable business practices on consumer purchase decisions and determine whether brand image mediates this relationship among consumers in India.

Research Objectives

To examine the effect of sustainable business practices on consumer purchase decisions.
To examine the effect of sustainable business practices on brand image.
To determine the effect of brand image on consumer purchase decisions.
To test the mediating role of brand image in the relationship between sustainable business practices and consumer purchase decisions.

Research Questions

What is the effect of sustainable business practices on consumer purchase decisions?
How do sustainable business practices influence brand image?
Does brand image influence consumer purchase decisions?
Does brand image mediate the relationship between sustainable business practices and consumer purchase decisions?

Significance of the Study

The study has theoretical, empirical, and managerial significance. Theoretically, it integrates Stakeholder Theory with S–O–R logic to explain how firm-level sustainability signals may become consumer-level brand evaluations and purchase responses. Empirically, it extends India-focused sustainable-consumption research by shifting attention from isolated green-product attributes toward a broader perception of sustainable business practices. Managerially, the study can help firms understand whether sustainability creates consumer value through brand image and can inform brand positioning, sustainability communication, and anti-greenwashing practices.

SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS

The unit of analysis is the individual consumer.
The geographical focus is India, with respondents preferably drawn from multiple urban locations rather than a single institution.
The study concerns consumer-facing brands that respondents can evaluate based on experience or familiarity.
The study uses perceived sustainable business practices; it does not independently audit the actual sustainability performance of firms.
The dependent variable is self-reported purchase decision/intention unless verified purchase records are added.
The cross-sectional design is explanatory but does not establish definitive temporal causality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Business Practices

Sustainable business practices refer in this study to business activities and processes perceived by consumers as reducing environmental harm, supporting social well-being, and operating ethically and responsibly. The environmental dimension may include waste reduction, resource efficiency, sustainable sourcing, emissions reduction, and responsible packaging. The social dimension may include fair treatment of employees, workplace safety, community engagement, and social inclusion. The ethical/responsible dimension may include transparency, responsible governance, anti-corruption, ethical sourcing, and truthful communication (Mohd Pauzi& Shahadat Hossen, 2025).

The broader framing is preferable to equating sustainability with 'green marketing' alone. The UN and OECD both recognize that responsible production and business conduct extend beyond environmental performance to social and governance-related impacts. The conceptual breadth also aligns with contemporary sustainable-marketing research, although the exact dimensions must be operationalized carefully to avoid making the construct too heterogeneous.

Brand Image

Brand image refers to the set of associations, beliefs, perceptions, and overall impressions consumers hold about a brand. In this study, brand image is not limited to a 'green image'; it represents the overall favorable perception that may be influenced by sustainability-related behavior. This distinction is important because a brand can be perceived as sustainable without necessarily being perceived as high quality, trustworthy, or desirable. The proposed model therefore tests whether sustainability contributes to overall brand image and whether that image subsequently relates to purchase decisions.

Consumer Purchase Decisions

The term consumer purchase decision can refer to actual behavior, intention, preference, consideration, or willingness to choose. To avoid construct ambiguity, this study recommends operationalizing the dependent variable as 'consumer purchase decision intention' or 'purchase-related decision response' unless actual behavioral data are available. The questionnaire can capture consideration of the brand, preference over alternatives, intention to choose the brand, and willingness to recommend. Recommendation should be treated cautiously because it is an advocacy outcome rather than a pure purchase decision.

Sustainability and Consumer Purchase Decisions

Sustainability may affect purchase decisions through perceived value, ethical alignment, reputation, trust, perceived consumer effectiveness, differentiation, and social norms. However, sustainability does not necessarily dominate traditional choice criteria such as price, quality, availability, convenience, and product performance. India research reinforces this complexity. Studies have shown that environmental concern, attitudes, perceived behavioral control, digital communication, and other factors can shape green purchase intention, demonstrating that consumer responses depend on multiple interacting conditions (Niloy et al., 2023; Mia et al., 2025).

Sustainable Practices and Brand Image

Corporate sustainability can function as a signal of responsibility and credibility. When consumers perceive a firm's actions as consistent and authentic, these actions may become favorable brand associations. Rastogi et al. (2024) provide direct empirical evidence that sustainable marketing practices positively influence brand image. Their study of 302 participants in India's consumer electronics sector used PLS-SEM and found that brand image mediated the relationship between sustainable marketing and customer loyalty. Jabeen and Khan (2023) similarly place green brand image within the relationship among green marketing, CSR, and green purchase intention.

Brand Image and Purchase Decisions

A favorable brand image can increase purchase-related responses by reducing uncertainty, strengthening preference, supporting perceived credibility, and creating positive associations. Recent sustainable-consumption research continues to identify brand image as an important component of the purchase process. Achiraqui et al. (2025), for example, found that green brand image significantly predicted sustainable fashion choices among young Moroccan consumers, while brand image also formed part of broader mediated pathways. Chan (2025) similarly investigated green brand positioning and purchase intention using self-image and functional congruence as mediators.

Brand Image as a Mediator

Mediation addresses the question of how an independent variable influences an outcome through an intervening variable. Preacher and Hayes (2008) emphasize estimating indirect effects through resampling rather than depending solely on normal-theory assumptions. In the present study, the indirect effect is SBP → BI → CPD. A significant bootstrapped indirect effect would provide evidence that brand image is one pathway through which perceived sustainability relates to purchase-related responses. The study should not describe brand image as a 'necessary' mechanism unless the data and theory justify that stronger claim.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory argues that firms create value through relationships with stakeholders rather than focusing exclusively on shareholders (Freeman, 1984). Consumers are important stakeholders because they respond to product quality, corporate behavior, ethical conduct, and social/environmental impacts. Sustainable business practices can therefore be interpreted as evidence that a firm recognizes and manages stakeholder interests. In the proposed model, stakeholder-oriented sustainability is expected to contribute to a more favorable brand image and, consequently, consumer purchase decisions.

Stimulus–Organism–Response Framework

The S–O–R framework provides the psychological structure of the model. Sustainable business practices are treated as the stimulus because they are external signals originating from the firm. Brand image is the organismic evaluation because consumers interpret the stimulus and form an internal assessment of the brand. Purchase-related response is the behavioral outcome. This creates the sequence:

Sustainable Business Practices (S) → Brand Image (O) → Purchase Decision Response (R)

Integrated Theoretical Logic

Stakeholder Theory explains why sustainable practices are strategically relevant to consumers and other stakeholders, while S–O–R explains how those practices can be processed into brand evaluations and behavioral responses. The two frameworks are complementary rather than competing: Stakeholder Theory supplies the business-level rationale, and S–O–R supplies the consumer-processing mechanism.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Rationale: Studies of sustainable/green marketing generally report positive purchase-related effects, although their magnitude can depend on product, consumer, and contextual factors. India studies also demonstrate that sustainability-related variables are relevant to purchase intention (Niloy et al., 2023; Mia et al., 2025).

H1: Sustainable business practices have a significant positive effect on consumer purchase decisions.

Rationale: Sustainable marketing has been shown to strengthen brand image in consumer research, including Rastogi et al. (2024), while CSR and green-marketing studies also position brand image as an important consumer evaluation.

H2: Sustainable business practices have a significant positive effect on brand image.

Rationale: A favorable brand image can strengthen preference and reduce uncertainty. Recent sustainable-fashion and green-brand studies provide evidence that brand image is associated with purchase-related outcomes (Achiraqui et al., 2025; Chan, 2025).

H3: Brand image has a significant positive effect on consumer purchase decisions.

Rationale: The proposed indirect pathway is consistent with recent mediation research in sustainable marketing. Rastogi et al. (2024) found brand image to mediate sustainable marketing effects on loyalty, and related studies have found brand-image pathways linking green marketing to purchase intention.

H4:Brand image significantly mediates the relationship between sustainable business practices and consumer purchase decisions.

Recommended construct specification: environmental, social, and ethical/responsible practices may be modeled as dimensions of a higher-order sustainable-business-practices construct. Before data collection, the researcher must decide whether these dimensions are reflective or formative. Because environmental, social, and ethical practices represent distinct facets that collectively form the broader concept, a formative higher-order specification may be theoretically defensible; this decision should be made before analysis and justified with construct theory rather than chosen solely to improve statistical fit.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a positivist/post-positivist quantitative orientation and a deductive approach. Existing theory and empirical evidence are used to formulate hypotheses, which are then tested using survey data. The approach is suitable for estimating relationships among latent constructs and testing a specified mediation model (Hossen&Pauzi, 2025).

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory survey design is proposed. Data are collected at one point in time from individual consumers.

Research Context and Population

The target population consists of adults aged 18 years or older in India who have purchased consumer products or services and can meaningfully evaluate a brand. Respondents should be instructed to select one familiar brand they have recently purchased, considered, or have sufficient experience with. This 'focal brand' procedure reduces ambiguity caused by respondents evaluating different brands simultaneously.

Sampling and Sample Size

A non-probability purposive/convenience strategy may be used when a national probability sample is not feasible. However, the paper must explicitly state that the resulting sample is not statistically representative of all Indiai consumers. A target of 300–500 valid responses is reasonable for a simple mediation model, but the final sample size should be justified using an a priori statistical power analysis or the requirements of the selected SEM estimator. India studies have successfully used SEM with samples ranging from several hundred to much larger online samples, demonstrating the feasibility of survey-based structural modeling in this context (Niloy et al., 2023; Mia et al., 2025).

Data Collection Procedure

Prepare the questionnaire from validated or carefully adapted scales.
Obtain supervisor/expert review for content clarity and construct coverage.
Pilot the questionnaire with approximately 30–50 eligible respondents.
Revise ambiguous or redundant items.
Distribute the final survey online and/or in person across multiple consumer groups.
Use an eligibility screen and one focal-brand instruction.
Remove duplicate, incomplete, patterned, or implausibly fast responses according to pre-specified rules.

Measurement Scale

Use a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Questionnaire Blueprint

Construct	Code	Illustrative item wording	Evidence/source direction
Sustainable Business Practices	SBP1	This brand makes active efforts to reduce its environmental impact.	Adapt/adaptively validate sustainability scales; Rastogi et al. (2024); Unal & Tascioglu (2022)
Sustainable Business Practices	SBP2	This brand demonstrates responsible treatment of employees and workers.	Use a validated social-sustainability/CSR item source before fieldwork.
Sustainable Business Practices	SBP3	This brand conducts its business in an ethical and transparent manner.	Use validated CSR/responsible-business measurement literature.

Sustainable Business Practices	SBP4	This brand contributes positively to the communities in which it operates.	Use validated CSR/social sustainability literature.
Brand Image	BI1	This brand has a strong and favorable overall reputation.	Jaggi et al. (2026); Rasool et al. (2022) as source directions; verify exact validated wording.
Brand Image	BI2	I regard this brand as credible and trustworthy.	Use validated brand-image/brand-trust distinction; do not merge constructs without justification.
Brand Image	BI3	This brand creates a positive impression in my mind.	Brand-image literature; confirm scale source before final deployment.
Purchase Decision Response	CPD1	I would consider choosing this brand when making a relevant purchase.	Purchase-intention literature; use validated scale.
Purchase Decision Response	CPD2	I am likely to choose this brand over competing alternatives.	Purchase-intention/preference literature; validate.
Purchase Decision Response	CPD3	I intend to purchase this brand in the future.	Purchase-intention literature; validate.

Important measurement note: the illustrative items above are a questionnaire blueprint, not a claim that the exact wording has been validated. Before data collection, the researcher should retrieve the full scale-development/measurement papers, confirm item provenance, dimensionality, and permissions, and cite the exact source for every adopted or adapted item.

Demographic and Control Variables

Age
Gender (with an inclusive response structure)
Education
Occupation
Monthly income band (optional)
City/region
Frequency of purchasing from the focal category
Brand familiarity

Controls should be included only when theoretically justified. Brand familiarity and product category are particularly important because sustainability perceptions may be stronger for consumers who know the brand well.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis will begin with systematic data screening to identify and address missing values, duplicate entries, careless or inattentive responses, statistical outliers, and implausible response times. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, will then be used to summarise the characteristics of the sample and key study variables. The reliability and validity of the measurement model will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, item loadings, and average variance extracted (AVE) to establish internal consistency and convergent validity, while heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) values will be examined to establish discriminant validity, following Henseler et al. (2015). Potential collinearity and common method bias will be assessed using inner variance inflation factor (VIF) values and, where appropriate for PLS-SEM, the full-collinearity VIF approach suggested by Kock (2015). For the structural model, path coefficients, confidence intervals, p-values, R^2 values, and relevant effect sizes will be reported to evaluate the hypothesised relationships and explanatory power of the model. Where PLS-SEM is employed, predictive relevance and appropriate out-of-sample predictive assessment will also be considered rather than relying solely on R^2. Mediation effects will be examined using bootstrapping with at least 5,000 resamples, with indirect effects and their confidence intervals reported, while robustness analyses will assess whether the main conclusions remain stable after introducing theoretically justified control variables.

Correct Mediation Interpretation

The original draft stated that full mediation occurs when the direct path becomes non-significant and partial mediation when both direct and indirect paths are significant. That rule is too simplistic. The primary test should be the indirect effect and its bootstrap confidence interval. If the indirect effect is statistically different from zero, mediation is supported. The direct effect can then be interpreted as evidence of an additional direct pathway, but researchers should avoid treating a non-significant direct effect as proof that the mediator is 'necessary.'

Common Method Bias

Because the same respondents may rate sustainable business practices, brand image, and purchase decision response in the same questionnaire, common method bias is a methodological risk. Procedural remedies should include clear and neutral wording, respondent anonymity, separation of construct sections, careful scale design, and avoidance of leading questions. Statistical assessment may also be used; Kock (2015) discusses full-collinearity VIF as one PLS-SEM diagnostic. Results should be reported cautiously because no single test proves that common-method bias is absent (Hossen et al., 2026).

Ethical Considerations

Participation must be voluntary and based on informed consent.
No unnecessary identifying information should be collected.
Participants should be able to withdraw before submitting the questionnaire.
Data should be stored securely and used only for the stated academic purpose.
If required by the institution, obtain ethical/IRB approval before data collection.

RESULTS

Primary data have not been provided in the source file. Therefore, this section is intentionally structured as a completion template rather than fabricated empirical findings. Report the number of questionnaires distributed, returned, excluded, and retained. State the final response/valid-case count.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage

Age	18–24 / 25–34 / 35–44 / 45+	9	100
Gender	10 / 25/ 20/ 20	10	100
Education	14/ 10/ 25/ 10	34	100
Location	Kuala Lumpur	36	100

DISCUSSION

The final Discussion should interpret—not merely repeat—the results. Each hypothesis should be discussed in relation to theory, prior studies, and the India context. If the results differ from prior research, explain plausible reasons such as product category, sample composition, price sensitivity, brand familiarity, environmental awareness, or differences between general sustainability and narrowly defined green marketing.

H1: Sustainable Business Practices → Purchase Decisions
If supported, argue that perceived sustainability contributes to consumer choice, while acknowledging that the effect may coexist with price, quality, and convenience considerations. Compare with India studies and international evidence.

H2: Sustainable Business Practices → Brand Image
If supported, explain sustainability as a brand signal that can create favorable associations and perceived responsibility. Compare with Rastogi et al. (2024).

H3: Brand Image → Purchase Decisions
Interpret brand image as a consumer-level evaluation that can strengthen preference and reduce uncertainty. Compare with green-brand and sustainable-consumption studies.

H4: Mediation role
Focus on the indirect effect. If supported, conclude that brand image is one mechanism through which perceived sustainability relates to purchase decisions. Do not claim it is the only or necessary mechanism.

Theoretical Implications

The study connects a firm-level sustainability construct with a consumer-level brand evaluation and purchase-related outcome. It extends India sustainable-consumption research by testing brand image as a central explanatory mechanism. It demonstrates how Stakeholder Theory and S–O–R can be used together without treating them as identical theories. It clarifies the difference between sustainability practices, brand image, and purchase response as distinct constructs.

Managerial Implications

Integrate sustainability into brand strategy rather than treating it solely as a CSR communication activity.
Use evidence-based sustainability communication and provide credible details about environmental and social performance. Build consistency between operational practices and marketing claims to reduce greenwashing risk.

Monitor brand-image outcomes alongside conventional sustainability KPIs. Segment sustainability communication according to consumer awareness, product category, and purchasing constraints. Do not assume that sustainability can compensate for weak quality, high prices, poor availability, or weak service.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish strong causal relationships among the study variables, as the data capture respondents' perceptions and behaviours at a single point in time. Second, the use of non-probability sampling restricts the statistical generalisability of the findings to the broader population of Indian consumers. Third, reliance on self-reported purchase intentions or behaviours may introduce response bias, as reported behaviour may differ from actual transaction behaviour. In addition, consumers' perceptions of corporate sustainability may not necessarily correspond with objectively verified environmental, social, or ethical performance. The broad conceptualisation of sustainable business practices (SBP) may also mask meaningful differences among environmental, social, and ethical dimensions. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal and experimental designs, verified purchase or transaction data, probability-based sampling, multi-country comparisons, and industry-specific models. Further studies could also examine potential moderating factors, including environmental consciousness, green trust, price sensitivity, product involvement, brand familiarity, and perceived greenwashing, to provide a more nuanced understanding of when and how sustainable business practices influence consumer responses.

CONCLUSION

This study proposes a focused explanation of how sustainable business practices can influence consumer purchase decisions through brand image. The central proposition is that sustainability is not only an operational or ethical issue but also a source of consumer-facing brand meaning. When consumers perceive a brand as environmentally, socially, and ethically responsible, those perceptions may strengthen brand image and subsequently influence purchase-related decisions. The India context is suitable for this investigation because recent studies demonstrate substantial interest in green and sustainable consumer behavior while also showing that purchase intention is shaped by multiple psychological and contextual factors.

The final empirical contribution will depend on primary data. Accordingly, the manuscript should be treated as a complete research-paper draft and study protocol until the survey data are analyzed. No numerical results should be inserted until the dataset has been cleaned and the measurement and structural models have been estimated.

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