



MASTER'S DISSERTATION

GREEN OR GREENWASHING? THE INFLUENCE OF ECO- LABELS ON ECO-CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS AND THEIR PURCHASE INTENTIONS

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THEIR PURCHASE INTENTIONS.**

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ABSTRACT

With the rising concern regarding climate change and its devastating effects on the planet, an increasing number of consumers are beginning to pay more attention to how their purchases affect the environment. They are known as eco-conscious consumers. This dissertation focuses on those consumers and their attitudes and intentions regarding eco-labels. The purpose is to understand how eco-labels influence eco-conscious consumers and their purchase intention. Regarding the methodology, a qualitative approach was adopted and one focus group as well as eleven interviews were conducted with eco-conscious consumers.

Findings exhibited that, in the view of this study's participants, there is a paradox between eco-conscious consumers' feelings and their intentions towards eco-labels, in the sense that their suspicions and confusion have no negative influence on purchase intention. It was also found that true proof of greenwashing, however, completely ceases their purchase intention. This study indicates that, among other things, companies and eco-label providers must strive to prevent confusion and skepticism as well as completely refrain from practicing greenwashing.

Keywords: Eco-labels; Eco-conscious consumers; Greenwashing; Purchase Intention; Sustainability.

RESUMO

Com a crescente preocupação com as mudanças climáticas e seus efeitos devastadores no planeta, cada vez mais consumidores prestam atenção ao modo em como as compras afetam o planeta. São conhecidos como consumidores ecologicamente conscientes. Esta dissertação centra-se nesses consumidores e nas suas atitudes e intenções relativamente aos eco-labels, também conhecidos como rótulos ecológicos. O objetivo é entender como é que os eco-labels influenciam os consumidores eco conscientes e sua intenção de compra. Quanto à metodologia, foi adotada uma abordagem qualitativa e foram realizados um grupo de foco e onze entrevistas com consumidores eco conscientes.

Os resultados mostraram que, de acordo com os participantes deste estudo, existe um paradoxo entre os sentimentos dos consumidores eco conscientes e suas intenções em relação aos eco-labels, no sentido em que suas suspeitas e confusão não têm influência negativa na intenção de compra. Constatou-se também que se a existência de greenwashing for comprovada, a intenção de compra é totalmente abalada. Este estudo indica que, entre outras coisas, as empresas e fornecedores de eco-labels devem se esforçar para evitar confusão e ceticismo, bem como abster-se de praticar greenwashing.

Palavras-chave: Eco-labels; Consumidores ecologicamente conscientes; Greenwashing; Intenção de compra; Sustentabilidade.

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INTRODUCTION

The world is becoming increasingly more concerned with water level rises, species extinction, glacier defrosting, CO2 levels, plastic pollution, and overall climate change (Cherian & Jacob, 2012; Szabo & Webster, 2020). For decades, scientists have warned global leaders about these events and the worrisome future of the planet if nothing is done to stop the advancement of climate change (Ripple et al., 2019).

The destructive effects of this climate emergency are becoming clear, with a surge of natural disasters worldwide, and record-breaking temperatures. The physical observation of these events has created a worry for the future in the public's mind (UN, 2019) and, consequently, a change in how consumers behave (Do Paco & Raposo, 2009; Barber, 2010; Okada & Mais, 2010).

In an effort to reduce their ecological footprint, consumers are starting to be more mindful of the environmental impact of their purchases (Baum, 2012). Some are even willing to pay more for sustainable alternatives (Wei et al., 2018; Sachdeva et al., 2015), such as products with recyclable or reusable packaging, energy-efficient lightbulbs and switching to biodegradable laundry detergents (Mainieri et al., 1997).

This group of consumers is known as eco-conscious consumers or green consumers. These individuals buy goods and services that they believe have a favorable environmental impact (Roberts, 1996).

Many organizations are adopting new green marketing strategies to convey their sustainability initiatives in order to meet these conscious buyers' needs. Nonetheless, not all of them are truthful and do not depict companies' environmental actions (Szabo & Webster, 2020). It originated a practice known as Greenwashing, the employment of misleading communication to promote the appearance that a company's goods or services are "green" or "eco-friendly" when they are not (Aji & Sutikno, 2015).

Greenwashing can have terrible implications for corporations, generating distrust in consumers regarding the environmental and ethical claims made by brands (Musgrove et al., 2018) and making it difficult for consumers to know which firms are environmentally friendly (Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008).

E-labels can be employed to improve the credibility of companies' eco-friendly claims (Brouwer, 2016) and attract target consumers (Testa et al., 2015). Eco-labels are defined as a marking of some products or even services to identify those with eco-friendly characteristics (Moravcikova et al., 2017).

These physical marks are applied to the product and packaging (Gosselt et al., 2019).

Furthermore, third-party certifications, which are eco-labels awarded by an external entity, play a crucial role in educating consumers about eco-friendly products and the environmental criteria they meet (Delmas & Grant, 2014).

Eco-labels positively impact ecologically conscious consumer behavior, as long as there is trust (Hameed & Waris, 2018). Still, for that to occur, consumers must be informed, understand what eco-labels are and how they are used (Testa et al., 2015; Delmas & Lessem, 2015). If consumers do not trust the institutions that issue eco-labels, it damages the intention to use them (Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018; Gorton et al., 2021).

This dissertation's purpose is to understand how eco-labels influence eco-conscious consumers and their purchase intention. The first research question is what characteristics do eco-conscious consumers associate with eco-labels? The second research question is how do eco-conscious consumers validate the information on eco-labels? Finally, the third research question is how does the attitude of eco-conscious consumers toward eco-labels influence their purchasing intention?

Regarding the methodology of this research and considering that the goal is to investigate consumer perceptions and intentions, a qualitative

approach was chosen. Two primary data collection methods were selected: one focus group with six participants and eleven interviews were conducted. All the participants consider themselves to be eco-conscious consumers.

Concerning the relevance of this study, the following studies have stated the need to study eco-labels and their influence on consumers, as well as eco-conscious consumer behavior. Stokes and Turri (2015) recommend researching to investigate consumers' comprehension and trust in eco-labels, given the increasing number of them.

Testa et al. (2015) suggest that research should look at how the greenwashing problem negatively impacts eco-friendly behavior. Finally, Taufique et al. (2016) state that there is a significant gap in understanding the influence of eco-labels on ecologically conscious consumer behavior apart from the demand and purchase of products with eco-labels.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first is the literature review, which is divided into three main topics: Corporate Social Responsibility, Green Marketing, and Consumer Behavior. The second chapter introduces the chosen methodology, dives further into the purpose and research questions, and also explains how the research was conducted, the chosen data collection techniques, and the data analysis.

Chapter three presents the main findings retrieved from the interviews and focus group, and in chapter four, there is an in-depth discussion of these findings while relating them to the literature review. The conclusions are presented in chapter five, and the limitations found while developing this dissertation are discussed in chapter six, along with recommendations for further study.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Corporate Social Responsibility, or CSR, can be described as a voluntary commitment some companies make in order to coordinate social and environmental concerns as part of their business plan and operations (European Commission, 2011). However, there is no widely accepted definition (Behringer & Szegedi, 2016; Xia et al., 2018).

Campbell (2007) emphasizes the importance of stakeholders in these CSR efforts. Companies “must not knowingly do anything that could harm their stakeholders [...] and if corporations do cause harm to their stakeholders, they must then rectify it whenever the harm is discovered and brought to their attention” (p. 951). In fact, it is by paying close attention to stakeholders’ concerns that companies can develop better and more comprehensive CSR strategies targeted to each stakeholder (Öberseder et al., 2013).

Corporate Social Responsibility is fundamental because it motivates businesses to deliberately improve their social, economic, and environmental contexts, thus generating value for consumers (Green & Peloza, 2011). However, and despite the advantages CSR can bring, many corporations handle it merely as a PR stunt (Öberseder et al., 2013).

If taken seriously, CSR policies can bring numerous benefits to companies. They can influence purchase intentions, create a positive relationship with brand image and generate competitive advantage (Bianchi et al., 2019; Grover, 2014). Furthermore, perceived CSR has a positive impact on perceptions of consumers towards corporate reputation. It also positively affects consumer trust and loyalty (Bianchi et al., 2019; Stanaland et al., 2011).

Bianchi et al (2019) argue that companies must ensure consumers know about their CSR initiatives. When consumers cannot identify CSR initiatives, companies struggle to justify CSR and to consider it an investment. Therefore, it is suggested that firms promote their CSR and communicate it as beneficial for society, the environment, and themselves.

Moreover, while it is true that when consumers have a better understanding of the company's CSR they have a good impression of firm reputation, if CSR communication seems too promotional, it can lead to the opposite (Kim, 2019; Diers-Lawson et al., 2020). Still, consumers tend to prioritize price, convenience, and quality and overlook CSR when making consumption decisions that clash with the priorities mentioned above (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020).

Corporate Social Responsibility has evolved substantially since it first appeared. As figure 1 demonstrates, CSR has matured over nearly a century. From a legal obligation in the 1930s to being consolidated into firms' core business strategies (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020). Currently, CSR also has a key role in representing the expectations and wishes of all stakeholders (Closon et al., 2015).

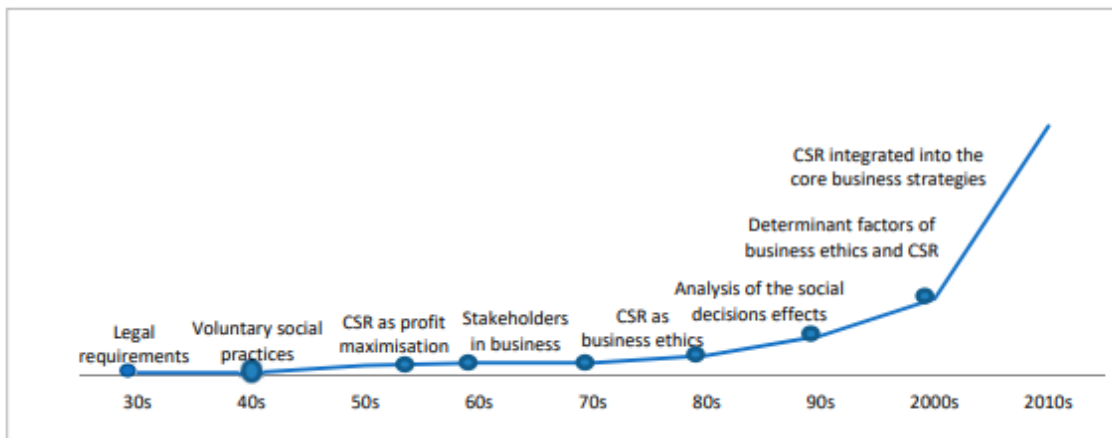


Figure 1. Evolution of CSR
Source: (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020)

Corporate Social Responsibility significantly impacts sustainable development (Behringer & Szegedi, 2016). While the two concepts have evolved separately for some time, growing awareness of the negative implications of corporate practices has put pressure on companies to change practices and adopt a sustainable business model (Oginni & Omojowo. 2016). It is evident that CSR plays a role in the sustainable development of the business sector, a significant area of sustainable development as a whole (Behringer & Szegedi, 2016).

1.2. GREEN MARKETING

Public concern regarding sustainability began arising during the decades of 1960 and 1970 (Peattie, 2001). The first Earth Day, in 1990, became a date of reference as millions of people from all over the world protested the deteriorating state of the planet's health (Gallicano, 2011).

As a result, the concept of Green Marketing, also known as Ecological Marketing, was established. This field of marketing was defined as “all activities designed to generate and facilitate any exchanges intended to satisfy human needs or wants, such that the satisfaction of these needs and wants occurs, with minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment” (Polonsky, 1994, p. 30-31).

According to Moravcikova et al. (2017), the primary purpose of green marketing is to “present consumers with the importance of protecting the environment in the context of product consumption” (p. 2). The authors accentuate the importance of creating lasting relationships with all stakeholders based on communication.

Marketers' strategies were initially founded on the notion of limitless resources and failed to recognize their impact on the environment. Nevertheless, with new knowledge stating the opposite, there has to be a

change in marketing practices (Kotler, 2011). According to the author, amongst the marketing practices that need changing are the 4 P's (Table 1).

The 4 P's	Description of the changes to the 4P's
Product	The process of developing a new product will need to be completely transformed. Used materials, as well as their source and carbon footprint, need to be taken into account. Packaging must be designed meticulously, ensuring it is biodegradable and disposable. When it comes to services, they have to show their concern regarding the environment through their energy consumption and use of equipment;
Price	Firms can establish a selection of products containing varying degrees of environmental friendliness and price them correspondingly since some consumers may be willing to pay more;
Place	The location of production, and distribution facilities have to be reviewed since, for environmentalists locally made is an important feature when selecting a product. Additionally, companies can invest more in online selling, hence reducing the number of drives to their locations made by consumers;
Promotion	Companies need to communicate their pledge to be sustainable in their advertisements. Furthermore, companies must consider whether to use printed or online promotion since printing uses more resources than digital. Additionally, the labeling needs to be transparent about their products' ingredients, materials, and carbon footprint.

Table 1. The 4P's of Green Marketing
Source: (Kotler, 2011)

Similarly, Bhalerao and Deshmukh (2015) agree that marketers should incorporate green marketing principles into their marketing mix. The authors suggest that the green marketing price for the average customer should be reasonable, that the internet is the green place, and that it is critical to select green promotion partners, materials, and messaging carefully.

Embracing green marketing can have plenty of benefits for businesses. It boosts the value of the company's products, gives it a competitive advantage, enhances its image, opens up new opportunities, and prepares it to deal with the environmental concerns of stakeholders (Moravcikova et al., 2017).

A company's commitment to the environment is now recognized as a crucial aspect of the competitive landscape (Mukonza & Swarts, 2019; Martínez et al., 2020). Eco-friendliness is not just a trend anymore, as it is quickly becoming a requirement and an inevitable expense for firms (Lewandowska et al., 2017). In fact, organizations that do not strive for sustainability will almost certainly be surpassed by the competition (Moravcikova et al., 2017).

Consumers increasingly seek to purchase products that do not harm the environment (Mukonza & Swarts, 2019). However, they struggle to distinguish between green and non-green products (Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008). This suggests that marketers must heavily promote the identification of green products to overcome the issue (Suki, 2017).

1.2.1. Greenwashing

Greenwashing occurs when a company has an unsatisfactory environmental performance but at the same time also communicates favorably

about said performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). It is also defined as the deliberate distortion of a company's sustainability efforts (Alves, 2009; Furlow, 2010).

The term Greenwashing was first created in 1986 to characterize the hotel industry's actions. Hotels started to implement towel reuse policies by claiming it was for environmental causes, namely saving water, when in reality it was simply a way for them to cut expenses (Becker-Olsen & Potucek, 2013).

Greenwashing has been found to have many consequences for companies that practice it. Firms with unsatisfactory environmental performance suffer when they engage in green advertising due to consumers growing skeptical upon seeing a gap between advertising and performance (Nyilasy et al., 2014). In fact, no advertising is a better strategy, as it generates better scores on brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

Similarly, fake advertising claims harm consumers' attitudes towards both the ads and the brands themselves (Schmuck et al., 2018). Greenwashing incidents lead to significantly lower scores on perceived CRS efforts, perceived intrinsic motives, and corporate brand evaluations (Parguel et al., 2011).

However, this behavior not only affects the companies that practice it, but it is detrimental to corporations that are truly ethical and making an effort to become environmentally friendly (Nyilasy et al., 2014; Keyner, 2020). It does

so by generating skepticism (Musgrove et al., 2018), green consumer confusion, and green perceived risk (Chen & Chang, 2013; Aji & Sutikno, 2015).

In fact, when consumers feel that they are at risk of being deceived by a greenwashed product, they lose credibility in the product and the brand (Martínez et al., 2020), and when it occurs, consumers’ skepticism may have a stronger impact on the purchase process (Braga Junior et al., 2016).

A 2009 report by the Terra Choice organization identified 2,219 products in the United States and Canada that made sustainability claims. They found that 98% of those committed at least one of the Sins of Greenwashing. The Sins of Greenwashing, displayed in Table 2, is a valuable tool that helps consumers assess green claims based on seven different sins they may be committing.

The Seven Sins	Description
The Sin of the Hidden Trade-off	Points that a product is green based on a limited set of characteristics and fails to mention other important environmental problems;
The Sin of No Proof	Committed when a claim cannot be supported by accessible information or third-party certifications;
The Sin of Vagueness	Committed by claims that are far too broad or imprecise and lead to consumers misunderstanding the claim;
The Sin of Irrelevance	Occurs when an environmental claim made may be truthful but has no significance or weight for consumers when making purchasing decisions;

The Sin of Lesser of Two-Evils	The claims of products may be true, but they divert the consumers from the crucial environmental effect within that product category;
The Sin of Fibbing	Not as recurring, but it happens when the claims made are simply false.
The Sin of Worshipping False Labels	Occurs when corporations take advantage of consumers' demand for third-party labels and make fraudulent claims with fake labels.

Table 2. The Seven Sins of Greenwashing
Source: (Terra Choice, 2009)

Some companies might have to prepare to be seen as greenwashing, even if they do not actually incur in the practice. Perceived greenwashing occurs when corporations have poor environmental credibility, and so any green communication they carry out regarding their products is going to be perceived by consumers as a greenwashing scheme (Olsen et al., 2014).

It can also be defined as the reaction of consumers to the interaction between green advertising and CSR (Nyilasy et al., 2014). When consumers perceive greenwashing, they no longer have a positive attitude, it is harder for them to recognize the benefits of green products, and overall, it leads to consumers rejecting the product (Correa et al., 2017).

1.2.2. Eco-labels

Consumers are increasingly becoming more demanding and expect transparency, pressing corporations to reveal more information regarding the

origin and quality of materials used on products (Gazzola et al., 2020). With this new consumer demand in mind, the first eco-label, Blue Angel, was created in Germany in 1978 (Spengler et al., 2020).

Many have followed since then and currently over 450 eco-labels are active worldwide (Ecolabel Index, n.d.). Eco-labels can be defined straightforwardly as “the labeling of products and services that are more environmentally friendly than their substitutes.” (Moravcikova et al., 2017, p.3)

However, ISO, the International Organization for Standardization (1999) offers a more comprehensive definition of eco-labels as “verifiable and accurate information, which is not misleading, on environmental aspects of products and services, to encourage the demand for and supply of those products and services that cause less stress on the environment, thereby stimulating the potential for market-driven continuous environmental improvement” (p. 2).

Eco-labels are considered a distinguishable marketing tool for communicating to consumers that a product is eco-friendly (Cai et al., 2017). They are essential not only for companies but also for consumers since they may help consumers to make informed purchasing decisions (Stokes & Turri, 2015). Eco-labels can be divided into three categories, as described in table 3 (Spengler et al., 2020).

Types of Eco-labels	Description
Type I	Voluntary endeavors, based on multiple criteria and third-party initiatives that grant permits to apply environmental labels on certain products;
Type II	Self-declared, exclusively informative claims;
Type III	Programs that give quantifiable environmental data of a product, based on criteria set by a third-party, such as life cycle analysis, and are verified by either the same or another qualified third-party organization.

Table 3. Eco-label types
Source: (Spengler et al., 2020)

Consumers' use and intention to use eco-labels are linked to their trust in the sources of information and the exterior guarantees of the eco-label claims (Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018). Gorton et al., (2021) likewise argue that institutional trust is crucial, as it influences the trust in a label affiliated with that institution, consequently affecting the usage of eco-labels in the consumer decision-making process.

Furthermore, consumer adoption of eco-labels will be restricted if distrust is conveyed, especially ones with certification traits hard for consumers to prove from their own experience (Gorton et al., 2021). This being said, consumers usually prefer eco-labels issued by sponsors that they deem to be more trustworthy, namely the government and environment non-profits, while being more distrusting of eco-labels that are sponsored by businesses (Darnall et al., 2012).

And while the use of eco-labels has grown significantly around the globe, consumers' skepticism has precluded them from being widely used (Vittersø & Tangeland, 2015), as only 22% of environmentally conscious consumers state that they act on their environmental concerns by acquiring eco-labeled products (Kantar, 2020).

Third-party certification is a way to overcome consumer mistrust and skepticism. They corroborate companies' claims that their products are sustainable, ethically made, or cruelty-free (Cerchia & Piccolo, 2019) and are more likely to thrive if they are third-party certified (Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018), not to mention more likely to gain competitive advantage over their opponents (Testa et al., 2015).

Still, for eco-labels to have their intended effect, consumers need to be informed, aware of eco-labels' meaning, and understand them (Testa et al., 2015). Knowledge of eco-labels significantly encourages consumers to have improved environmental attitudes and behavior (Taufique et al., 2016). Likewise, design is an important aspect of success for eco-labels, as good design leads consumers to behave greener (Hameed & Waris, 2018).

Because eco-labels can often send confusing messages to consumers, they must communicate their message properly, emphasizing what environmental traits and advantages they grant (Delmas & Lessem, 2015).

Additionally, consumers' knowledge and recognition of eco-labels are important, as it accurately predicts green purchasing intention (Testa et al., 2015; Jonell et al., 2016).

Other factors come into play for consumers. High prices and loyalty to other brands can prevent them from purchasing items with eco-labels (Global CAD, 2019). Consumers also value other attributes, and make their decisions based on what is healthier, has better quality, or even with what they are already familiar. Consumers also feel like they do not have enough time or knowledge to make more informed decisions (Quintero Vargas, 2020).

1.3. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

1.3.1. Ecologically Conscious Consumer Behavior

Water level rises, species extinction, glacier defrosting, CO2 levels, plastic pollution, and overall climate change are all deeply concerning people all around the planet. (Cherian & Jacob, 2012; Szabo & Webster, 2020). As a result, an increasing number of individuals are becoming more conscious and adjusting their purchasing habits, in order to reduce their ecological footprint (Baum, 2012).

The term ecologically conscious consumer behavior (ECCB) was originally used by Roberts (1996) who defined ecologically conscious consumers as “those who purchase products and services which they perceive to have a positive (or less negative) impact on the environment” (p. 222). Other terms are used to describe this group of consumers, such as green consumers, which has a similar definition: “individuals who take into consideration some environmental criteria when deciding what to buy. When meeting his or her needs and desires, this type of consumer chooses products that damage the environment less” (Brochado et al., 2017, p.3)

People exhibit ECCB when they are worried about the environment and recognize the need for environmental protection (Brochado et al., 2017) Nevertheless, general environmental knowledge has no impact on attitude towards the environment, and instead, consumers are motivated by specific issue environmental knowledge, such as eco-label knowledge (Adrita & Mohiuddin, 2020).

1.3.2. Green Consumption

Green consumption is a type of consumption that is consistent with environmental preservation (Testa et al., 2021). It can be considered a way of activism since consumers focus on acquiring products sold by socially or

environmentally responsible companies and abstain from buying from unethical corporations (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

These consumers understand that their decisions have consequences on the world and that they can make changes through their purchasing power (Vitell et al., 2016). They specifically understand the connection between buying products and acting in an environmentally friendly way and know that by boycotting harmful products they help to preserve the environment. Hence, green consumers refrain from acquiring goods that they believe to be harmful to themselves and to the environment (Hailes, 2007).

Straughan and Roberts (1999), argue that the behavior of each individual differs according to their level of environmental knowledge. Akehurst and Gonçalves (2012) add to this, by claiming that psychographic variables (altruism, perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE), environmental concern (EC), and liberalism) are successful in characterizing green consumer behavior, while demographic variables (sex, age, education, and income) are unable to explain this behavior. Brochado et al. (2017) agree that psychographic variables explain ECCB far better than demographic ones.

Testa et al. (2021) go even further by identifying several drivers that can influence the purchasing behavior of green products. The authors then aggregate all of the factors into seven categories, which can be seen in figure 2.



Figure 2. Drivers of green consumption
Source: (Testa et al., 2021)

Consumers are more likely to adopt green products when they are aware and informed from various sources such as social media, friends, and family and print that certain products are environmentally friendly (Suki, 2017). Still, consumers highly value other attributes such as product quality, corporate image, store image, and price, which impact their satisfaction when using green products (Suki, 2017).

Retailers are highly relevant to green consumption, as they can be considered gatekeepers that make the connection between consumers and

environmentally friendly products (Guyader et al., 2017). They can easily guide consumers' intentions by highlighting pertinent information, directing consumers within the store, as well as carrying a variety of green products in their stores (Guyader et al., 2017).

1.3.3. Green Purchase Behavior

Consumer behavior is the conduct that people engage in when they look for, choose, use, assess, and discard goods and services that they believe will meet their needs (Asshidin et al., 2016). Similarly, green purchase behavior is defined as the “affirmative selection and acquisition of products and services that most effectively minimize negative environmental impacts over their life cycle of manufacturing, transportation, use and recycling or disposal” (Vazifehdoust et al., 2013, p. 2490).

Kotler & Keller (2016) divide purchase behavior into five stages, as described in figure 3. The authors claim that the process of purchasing begins before the actual purchase and has lasting effects after.

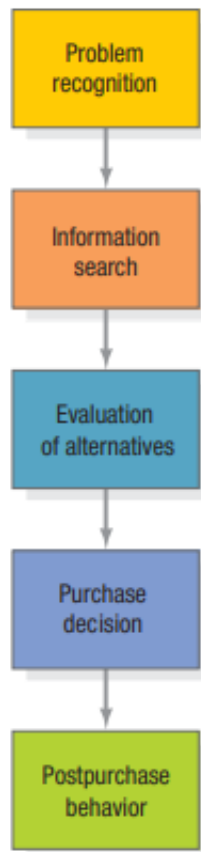


Figure 3. The Five Stage Model
Source: (Kotler & Keller, 2016)

When it comes to the factors that influence consumers' green purchase behavior, they are identified as the concern for the environment, as well as social challenges, and the features of products, both in a functional and green sense (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). Furthermore, other attributes like green brand image, green brand love, and green brand loyalty all have a positive influence on green purchase behavior, while greenwashing has a negative effect on green purchase behavior, both directly and indirectly (Hameed et al., 2021).

1.3.3.1. Green Purchase Intention

Green purchase intention is defined as “the probability and willingness of a person to give preference to products having eco-friendly features over other traditional products in their purchase considerations” (Rashid, 2009, p. 134). A strong purchase intention will most likely lead consumers towards an actual purchase, whilst a weak one will not (Arslan & Zaman, 2015).

When developing green products, it is imperative that companies develop an adequate green marketing mix, as it has a strong correlation with purchase intention (Mahmoud, 2018). Ansar (2013) goes even further by specifying that environmental advertising, price, and eco-friendly packaging all have favorable relationships with green purchase intention. Kong et al. (2014) disagrees, claiming that both green advertising and green packaging have no significant impact on purchase intention.

Concern about the environment as well as the level of knowledge and awareness of eco-labels lead to a stronger purchase intention (Rashid, 2009). Kong et al. (2014) agrees that consumers’ perception of eco-labels positively impacts purchase intention, as well as the consumers’ perceived value of green products and perception of companies’ sustainability strategies.

However, some factors will harm purchase intention, such as greenwashing (Nguyen et al., 2019). Consumers are becoming increasingly

conscious of environmental benefits, as well as health and safety concerns when purchasing green items. As a result, they are distrustful of corporations' motivations and are quicker to negatively judge products, which leads to lower purchase intention from firms that greenwash (Nguyen et al., 2019).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a psychological model developed by Ajzen (1985) that predicts human behavior. The theory, displayed in figure 4, focuses on the person's intention to follow through with a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The author states that intentions reflect the motivational variables that impact action. They signal how much effort people intend to put in order to perform a behavior, therefore the stronger the intention, the more likely it is for the behavior to happen (Ajzen, 1991).

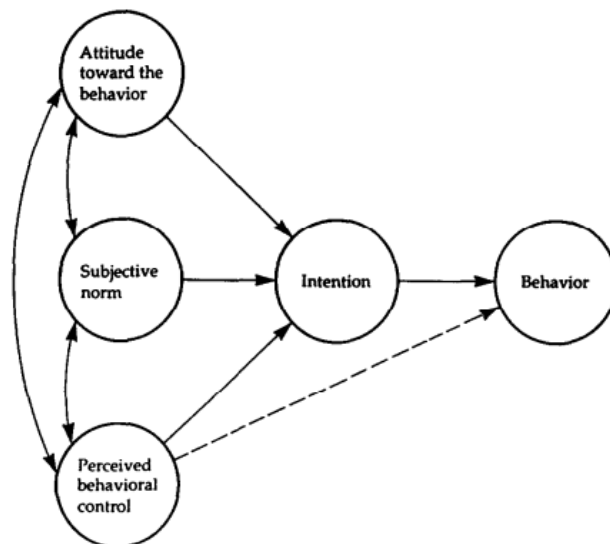


Figure 4. The Theory of Planned Behavior
Source: (Ajzen, 1991)

1.3.3.2. Attitude-behavior gap

An ethical mindset and attitude, unfortunately, does not always materialize into explicit green purchasing behavior (Davies et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2016). Despite the increasing demand for ethical products, studies show that there is a considerable gap between consumers' expressed opinions regarding ethical products and their actual, real purchase behavior (Govind et al., 2019).

This phenomenon is known as the attitude-behavior gap. This dissonant behavior presents itself in about 30% of consumers, who are believed to be ethically minded but do not behave that way in their purchasing decisions (Davies et al., 2012).

Researchers have been trying to pinpoint why consumers' real purchasing habits do not correspond to their eco-friendly attitudes (Yoon et al., 2016). Unfortunately, they fail to reach a consensus as to what factors may be causing this gap. Davies et al. (2012) divide it into two camps: research error and barriers to cognitive decision-making.

Gregory-Smith et al. (2013) claim that it is wrong to classify consumers as either ethical or unethical, as most consumers display both behaviors during the choice-making process. Furthermore, the authors believe that consumers recognize that they have dissonant behaviors: consumers are filled with guilt

when they make an unethical choice, and so they attempt to compensate for it with an ethical one, which then leads to a feeling of pride.

It is unclear whether the attitude-behavior gap occurs when it comes to eco-labels. While some studies say it does (Doksaeter & Nordman, 2019), others claim the opposite (Aneshansley, 2021; Riskos et al., 2021).

1.3.3.3. Willingness to Pay

There is a growing concern amongst individuals regarding the health of our planet (Szabo & Webster, 2020). As a result, corporations are under giant amounts of pressure from their stakeholders to adopt environmental policies and include a sustainable agenda in their strategies (Johnstone & Tan, 2015).

Firms are increasingly spending more on Research and Development (R&D) to create green products, as well as green technologies (Gleim et al., 2013). This may result in paying a premium for green products, especially at the time of market entry (Berger, 2019).

A consumer's willingness to pay is a good predictor of whether or not they will convert to a costlier, certified product, as long as the product meets a variety of other criteria (McGoldrick & Freestone, 2008). WTP for green

products is linked with prosocial attitudes and trustworthiness, but in the case of organic food products, health benefits are also a factor (Berger, 2019).

According to Wei et al. (2018), there is a willingness to pay more for green products, but it is not the same for all consumers. Consumers worried about the environment, as well as ones with increased eco-literacy, are more willing to pay a premium for green products, than ones who are not as concerned about the environment. Interestingly, the co-creation and customization of green products increase the willingness to pay more in consumers with a low eco-literacy.

Several other factors influence consumers' likelihood of paying premiums for green products, including motivation, such as eco-anxiety, abilities, culture, and socio-demographic circumstances (Kang et al., 2012). Despite income being relevant in green consumer characterization, as mentioned previously, it does not affect willingness to pay, which is surprising, since income affects the ability to pay for goods (McGoldrick & Freestone, 2008).

However, the price point of products influences willingness to pay a premium. For example, consumers spend 28% for an item priced at 10\$, but just 15% more for a 100\$ item (Elliott & Freeman, 2004). Multiple studies suggest that there is a clear willingness to pay a premium for green products (Sanjuán et al., 2003; Sakagami et al., 2006; Kang et al., 2012; Biswas & Roy,

2016; Wei et al., 2018) however McGoldrick and Freestone (2008) state that the willingness to pay is conditioned by consumer's belief in the products certifications.

A way to compensate for green premiums is by signaling, although this would only affect moderate premiums up to 50% (Berger, 2019). The author shows that individuals have a higher willingness to pay a premium when the choice (non-green product vs. an expensive green product) is made public.

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the research approach that was adopted to accomplish the study's intended objectives and answer the research questions. It does so by describing the research methodology employed, as well as the data collection techniques used.

The methodology chapter is therefore divided into three main sections. Firstly, there is the introduction of the purpose of this research, as well as the research questions. The second section establishes the methodology approach and justifies why this specific approach was chosen. Lastly, the third section introduces the data collection and data analysis techniques.

2.1. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to understand how eco-labels influence eco-conscious consumers and their purchase intention. With this purpose in mind, three research questions arise:

- RQ1: What characteristics do eco-conscious consumers associate with eco-labels?
- RQ2: How do eco-conscious consumers validate the information on eco-labels?

- RQ3: How does the attitude of eco-conscious consumers towards eco-labels influence their purchasing intention?

2.2. Methodological Approach

This research follows a qualitative approach. Qualitative research investigates attitudes, behavior, and experiences. Its goal is to get in-depth feedback from participants (Dawson, 2002). Additionally, this approach is chosen when the goal is to obtain a clear and comprehensive view of the entire setting in which the phenomenon occurs (Malhotra et al., 2017).

Therefore, this method was chosen, considering that the focus of the investigation is to explore consumer perceptions and attitudes, as well as understand certain intentions. Furthermore, this choice was made since few studies have yet to study the link between eco-labels and consumers, and the ones that did, employed a quantitative methodology (Brécard, 2014; Testa et al., 2015; Taufique et al., 2016; Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018; Hameed & Waris, 2018; Sharma & Kushwaha 2019; Gorton et al., 2021).

All of this reinforces the importance of a qualitative study on this topic. It will add to existing studies by providing a fresh perspective and by creating new, in-depth knowledge. The contribution that is expected from this research

is to bring a deeper understanding of consumers' perceptions of eco-labels and how that relates to their intention to purchase. The intention is that the research contributes not only from a theoretical point of view but from one that has practical implications as well.

2.3. Data Collection

This investigation will rely on primary data collected from interviews as well as one focus group. Both collection techniques focus on eco-conscious consumers, and both will answer all three of the research questions.

2.3.1. Focus Groups

In the first moment, one focus group was conducted with eco-conscious participants. The focus group is a valuable data collection technique, as it allows for creative discussions between participants and presents a good setting for the use of products to stimulate discussion (Malhotra et al., 2017). In this case, products with eco-labels were used. Furthermore, in focus groups, it is possible to see how the participants react to one another's points of view and form opinions as a result (Bell, 2005).

The focus group was conducted online via the Teams platform, during the month of May 2022, with six participants and it lasted 1 hour. Table 4 exhibits the question guide used during the focus group and table 5 consists of the participants' profiles, all of which are aged between 20 and 30 years old.

Research Question	Question	Source
RQ1	Which of these labels do you recognize?	Testa et al., 2015; Taufique et al., 2016; Jonell et al., 2016
RQ1	What do you think about these labels?	
RQ1	What feelings come to mind when you think of products with these labels?	
RQ2	In what sources do you trust when you research these labels?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018
RQ3	How do you use these labels to make your consumption decisions?	Stokes and Turri, 2015
RQ2	How do you feel when companies claim their products are green?	
RQ2	What can companies do to make you trust their green claims?	Cerchia & Piccolo, 2019
RQ1	What thoughts come to mind when you hear the word eco-label?	
RQ2	What conclusions do you draw when companies put eco-labels on their products?	
RQ2	How do you validate if companies are being transparent and truthful with their eco-labels?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018
RQ2	Given that there are 3 different types of eco-labels, how do you measure them in terms of effectiveness and trust?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust 2018; Spengler et al., 2020; Gorton et al., 2021

RQ3	When one product has an eco-label and the other does not, but they are similar in quality and price, and both promote themselves as sustainable, which would you choose?	Davies et al., 2012
RQ3	How would you adjust your attitude if an organization you trust changed its labeling criteria?	
RQ3	How would you adjust your attitude if an organization you trusted was involved in a greenwashing scandal?	Nyilasy et al., 2014; Schmuck et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2020
RQ3	How much more money (%) would you be willing to spend on a green product, as opposed to its non-green competitor?	Kang et al., 2012; Biswas & Roy, 2016; Wei et al., 2018
RQ3	What if the product had an eco-label? How much more money (%) would you be willing to spend then?	McGoldrick & Freestone (2008)
RQ2	What makes you trust the organizations that certify products?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018; Gorton et al., 2021
RQ3	Imagine you have the opportunity to choose between eco-labels issued by governments, businesses, or NGOs. Could you describe your decision-making process?	Darnall et al., 2012

Table 4. Focus group question guide
Source: Self elaboration

Identification	Gender
F1	Female
F2	Female
F3	Female
F4	Male
F5	Male

F6	Female
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Table 5. Focus Group Participants
Source: Self elaboration

2.3.2. Interviews

During the second stage, interviews were conducted with eco-conscious consumers as well. A comprehensive picture of the green consumer can be achieved with in-depth interviews with consumers (Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2015).

Furthermore, interviews have the benefit of being flexible. They allow the researcher to “follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do.” (Bell, 2005, p. 157). With this advantage in mind, and to allow for a more open and in-depth discussion, the interviews were semi-structured.

There were eleven interviews, conducted online through May and June of 2022, on a few different video-conferencing platforms. They lasted between 15 to 40 minutes. Table 6 exhibits the question guide used during the focus group and table 7 consists of the participants’ profiles.

Research Question	Question	Source
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RQ1	Which of these eco-labels do you recognize and what do you think about them?	Testa et al., 2015; Taufique et al., 2016; Jonell et al., 2016.
RQ1	What do you think when you hear the word eco-label?	
RQ1	In your opinion, what would you say are the benefits of eco-labels?	
RQ2	What is the degree of difficulty in finding information about eco-labels?	
RQ2	What sources do you trust when searching for information about eco-labels?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018
RQ3	How do eco-labels help you make purchase decisions?	Stokes and Turri, 2015
RQ2	When companies claim that their products are sustainable, how do you validate if the company is being truthful?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018
RQ3	How important are eco-labels when you have to choose between two products?	Davies et al., 2012
RQ3	How would you feel if an organization which you trusted was involved in a greenwashing scandal?	Nyilasy et al., 2014; Schmuck et al., 2018;
RQ2	Given that there are 3 different types of eco-labels, how do you measure them in terms of effectiveness and trust?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018; Spengler et al., 2020; Gorton et al., 2021
RQ3	How much more money (%) would you be willing to spend for a product with an eco-label, as opposed to its non-green competitor?	McGoldrick and Freestone, 2008
RQ2	What makes you trust organizations that certify products?	Darnall & Vázquez-Brust, 2018; Gorton et al., 2021
RQ3	Imagine you have the opportunity to choose between eco-labels issued by governments, businesses, or NGOs. Could you describe your	Darnall et al., 2012

	decision-making process?	
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Table 6. Interviews question guide
Source: Self elaboration








Identification	Gender	Age Group
P1	Female	20-30
P2	Male	20-30
P3	Female	40-50
P4	Female	30-40
P5	Female	50-60
P6	Female	50-60
P7	Female	40-50
P8	Male	40-50
P9	Male	30-50
P10	Female	20-30
P11	Male	20-30

Table 7. Interview Participants
Source: Self elaboration

During both the focus group and the interviews, various products with eco-labels were introduced to the participants. This decision was made because eco-labels being present can have a significant influence on understanding eco-conscious consumer behavior (Hameed & Waris, 2018). Table 8 demonstrates the chosen eco-labels.

These specific eco-labels were chosen due to being some of the most common in the Portuguese setting, but also to guarantee eco-labels from multiple sponsors, such as governments, the EU, and third-party organizations.

Both the photos and description were retrieved from the Eco-label Index website. This source is the biggest database for eco-labels worldwide and tracks over 450 eco-labels all over the globe.

Eco-label	Description
	<p>This label is controlled by the Earth Island Institute, which monitors tuna businesses worldwide to guarantee that their fishing practices do not hurt dolphins.</p>
	<p>The Rainforest Alliance seal certifies that a product originates from a farm or forest enterprise that adheres to stringent environmental standards, while also promoting the rights and well-being of workers, their families, and communities.</p>
	<p>The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) supports ecologically responsible, socially fair, and economically feasible forest management worldwide.</p>
	<p>Fairtrade Standards encompass social, environmental, and economic requirements, as well as growth and trading conditions. The Standards are intended to promote the long-term growth of small-scale producers and agricultural workers in the world's poorest countries.</p>
	<p>A voluntary scheme aimed to encourage firms to offer environmentally friendly products and services and to make it easier for European customers to identify them.</p>
	<p>The MSC fisheries standard contains three main concepts that every fishery must demonstrate compliance with: Sustainable fish stocks, minimizing environmental impact, and effective management.</p>
	<p>Ecocert is a sustainable development certification body that specializes in the certification of organic agricultural products.</p>


	<p>The Nordic Eco-label or “Swan” shows that a product is environmentally friendly. The Swan uses procedures such as samples from independent laboratories, certificates, and control visits to ensure that products meet specified criteria.</p>
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Table 8. Eco-labels used during Data Collection
Source: (Ecolabel Index, n.d.)

2.4. Data Analysis

The chosen method for analyzing the data collected from the focus group and the interviews was content analysis. This approach focuses on organizing the content in a consistent manner into predetermined categories (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Bardin (2011) divides content analysis into three phases: pre-analysis, material exploration, and lastly result treatment, inference, and interpretation. After transcribing the data, the pre-analysis phase began. Pre-analysis is accomplished by what the author calls “floating” reading, similar to skimming and scanning.

Material exploration followed, where there was a thorough reading, to allow for coding. The coding process was divided into two cycles. In the first cycle, the coding process was inspired by in vivo. In vivo coding is a well-known qualitative method, which employs words or brief sentences from the participants’ speech as codes (Miles et al., 2014).

During the first cycle, 27 codes were defined using the in vivo inspired process. The second cycle was then used to refine the initial codes from 27 to 21, which will be presented in the next chapter.

3. FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings derived from the data that was gathered during the interviews and the focus group. Tables 9 through 13 display the data collected. On the left column are the answers that emerged from the data analysis and on the right are their corresponding codes, which culminated from the coding process.

Regarding the first research question, what characteristics do eco-conscious consumers associate with eco-labels, the participants showed to have conflicting opinions concerning eco-labels. Table 9 below shows the positive characteristics that the participants associated with eco-labels. Some consumers showed to be positive, they consider it a benefit that eco-labels are legally regulated and so closely monitored, as having some outside examination puts them at ease. A few participants also believe that eco-labels can be depended on and help them trust products.

Additionally, participants deem eco-labels to be genuinely eco-friendly, they believe there is an environmental concern behind them. Furthermore, they think eco-labels are not gatekeeping information, which means they are not impeding access to it and as long as you are willing to invest some time in the matter, it is easy to search for information about them.

Themes	Excerpts
Legally regulated and closely monitored	“But it brings the benefits... of having greater control because my idea is that you have to respect, well, certain guidelines.” (P5)
	“This is where the benefit of eco-labels lies, they are... a way of having an inspection that is not the company's own. So, it is not only a question of marketing. It is not only saying it is 100% recycled, there is... an outside institution that provides legiti... legitimization of this claim” (P8)
Trustworthy and dependable	“I, in reality, any, to me, inspires me confidence. I am not sure if that was the question,... any, I am not going, I cannot say one is better than the other. Any is a step that is being given by that brand, that industry, in the path of sustainability.” (P3)
	“I think that, from the outset, they are trustworthy things that give us... an idea that... that they are good for the environment” (P6)
	“Right, yes... the eco-label to me gives me some, some security right away” (P7)
Genuinely eco-friendly	“The positive side is that... that there can, in fact, be a concern behind it, in which the products... an environmental concern when they are making or processing the products that will be sold in the future” (P11)
	“No because I did not, I did not investigate the meaning of each one of them, but I suppose that, that there is an ecological concern behind it.” (P7)
	“They are about taking into account what you purchase, what you consume and taking into account always, obviously, the environment and ecology in general.” (P9)
Are not gatekeepers of information	“If I am interested in knowing, I can learn what they are, I can, just search, they have, even though it is a label they have things written. And if I google what it is written there I can, I believe I can, obtain information regarding what they are.” (P10)
	“Now nothing stops me from grabbing my phone, access to information is really easy now right, grab my phone and google and see exact, exactly what this certification consists of. So, I do not see a big difficulty in understanding, either from the logo or a simple internet research.” (P7)
	“Regarding that, I think the degree of difficulty is actually low,

	because with the information that we have online... Of course, it depends how people value their time in researching information, but it is not hard to find.” (P11)
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Table 9. Positive characteristics eco-conscious consumers associate with eco-labels
Source: Self elaboration

Table 10 shows the opposite, the negative characteristics that were associated with eco-labels. It is clear that the participants are not entirely sure if they should trust eco-labels, as they see eco-labels as dubious, questionable, unconvincing, and unreliable. They suspect there are some exaggerations and that the claims made by eco-labels are not completely true. Moreover, participants regard eco-labels as possible greenwashing practices. Although they are not certain of this, they definitively have their suspicions.

Some participants, while not dismissing the possibility of environmental concern, also strongly believe that companies use eco-labels as money-making schemes and that their primary concern is always money. Lastly, participants are concerned with how hard it is to understand eco-labels, as they believe them to be unclear and feel eco-labels are difficult to understand. They add that the sheer number of eco-labels makes it more difficult to grasp and to tell which can be trusted and which cannot.

Themes	Excerpts
Dubious, and questionable	“Here is the thing, I think any label is always worth what it is worth. That is, it is managed by certain standards, and so, simply saying that it is eco or that it is certified, or whatever, does not guarantee that it is 100% harmless, it guarantees that

	<p>it follows certain guidelines.” (P5)</p> <p>“Wow, type II is not... it is worth what it is worth, having it there or not is almost the same. I say almost because it would maybe draw attention to... for example the ingredients, or in this case that it says 100% recycled to the ... to the type of plastic that it is.” (P9)</p>
Unconvincing and unreliable	<p>“So, it is a little more that feeling, I look, and I am somewhat aware of that situation but at the same time I also do not know if I can trust... 100% in those labels, you know?” (F1)</p>
	<p>“It would be magnificent, I would like to believe in all of them and that they were all true... But when I see something like this I assume they are exaggerating.” (P9)</p>
	<p>“I have absolutely zero confidence when it is the, the brand itself saying that it this or that, I do not believe. It does not mean it is always... wrong. But I always start from a place of distrust and never trust.” (P8)</p>
Might be greenwashing	<p>“The eco-label, I always had my doubts in that part of greenwashing, because a lot of people say oh they put like eco-labels, and it is greenwashing. And in that case when it has that label I am unsure if it really... is an eco-product or if it is a little greenwashing, or not, but I imagine because it has a certificate and it is a label that, maybe that is not the case, but that actually is something I do not know.” (P1)</p>
	<p>“I do not let myself, do not let myself be immediately influenced by a very cute label that says that it is this or that, I always suspect a little and I prefer to go search, because I believe that greenwashing is, it is a huge temptation to companies.” (P7)</p>
	<p>“I would not be surprised. I think most of them are doing this brutal greenwashing.” (P5)</p>
Money making schemes	<p>“Well, even if a brand has these things behind, this concern so to say, because we know many brands just want to make money and use this as a cash grab.” (P1)</p>

	<p>“In the other hand negative, in the sense that there can be a concern behind or not, and it can be a strategy for quick sales and in a way, misleading, just because it has that stamp that basically creates a false illusion to the consumer and ends up not fulfilling certain requirements.” (P11)</p>
	<p>“They can have many benefits, even though the basis is only economical and not really a concern for brands, which I think most are greenwashing.” (P5)</p>
Unclear and hard to understand	<p>“Really there are so many certificates and labels that sometimes... it is hard to know what is legitimate.” (P1)</p>
	<p>“They are not clear enough.” (F6)</p>
	<p>“These brands put the label but then they do not, they do not communicate what they... what they fulfilled to have this label.” (P4)</p>

Table 10. Negative characteristics that eco-conscious consumers associate with eco-labels
Source: Self elaboration

As was seen, a variety of characteristics are associated with eco-labels. Some consumers have a more positive outlook and view eco-labels as legally regulated and closely monitored; trustworthy and dependable; genuinely eco-friendly and not gatekeepers of information.

On the other hand, some participants are not as trusting and have negative views on eco-labels. They consider them to be dubious and questionable; unconvincing and unreliable; might be greenwashing; money-making schemes and unclear and hard to understand.

Regarding the second research question, how do eco-conscious consumers validate the information on eco-labels, the participants shared how they are able to do so. The answers are exhibited in Table 11. Participants said that researching on their own plays a part in the process of validation. It is also clear that they prefer to trust information from reliable sources, such as governmental and third-party entities, rather than information provided by the brands themselves.

Further, they rely on their peers, but also other consumers, especially ones that do comprehensive research on the topic and share it on their websites or blogs. Similarly, participants also depend on their trusted social media influencers when it comes to validating information from eco-labels. Some other aspects also help consumers in this matter.

Participants are more likely to believe the information about eco-labels when they see that brands use them as a part of their long-term sustainability strategy. This means eco-labels are not isolated actions, they are inserted into the brand's growing sustainability strategy.

Likewise, the level of transparency of eco-labels helps participants as well. When an eco-label provider is transparent with its labeling criteria and shares data participants feel more trusting of them.

Themes	Excerpts
<p>Researching when purchasing items with eco-labels</p>	<p>“I do a double research, I research mainly the eco-label provider, who attributes it. Then I usually go to forums or similar things try to see if there is or not, some flaw in that company that provides eco-labels. So, I read what they say and then I see if what they are saying is true.” (P8)</p>
	<p>“I usually always trust, if one triggers any type of curiosity or something, I instantly go to World Business Council, I see news, see if it is being talked about in some place... in any negative way.” (P3)</p>
	<p>“I go to the company’s website, and I try to read like, about this product, I try to read what it is.... If I am really interested in it and it awakens my curiosity I do it, really. I go, do, try to connect the dots, especially in their information. Then I try to find third-party news, like actual news. If there is a scandal or awards were given, I even see if the award is valid or not “(P11)</p>
<p>Relying on external sources of information</p>	<p>“So sometimes it can be even external sources than can be a bit more legitimate to the consumer.” (P1)</p>
	<p>“Okay, good question. Honestly I would not trust the brands’ websites, I would lean more... more towards governmental entities... I feel I would go that way, to be sure.” (P2)</p>
	<p>“The places where I usually search are blogs or some websites already dedicated specifically to that, written, in a certain way, by consumers that are interested too and know a lot about those topics. In a way, and it almost does not make a lot of sense, but in a way, I feel those places have more credibility in terms of, of correct information than, for example, if I went to a government website that was talking about it, for example.” (F1)</p>
<p>Trusting their peers’ and other consumers’</p>	<p>“I also believe the people that, individually, dedicate themselves to these topics and do an individual research, sometimes, even often journalistic to these matters and that... I am not saying only one person, but I say if there</p>

<p>opinions.</p>	<p>are several, it starts, meaning a popular opinion, but a popular opinion that is sustained and studied, do you understand?" (P11)</p>
	<p>"I am lucky that my better-half, husband, partner, or whatever you want to call it is crazy about this things right, he, anything, maybe he is even the first person whom I ask, because he really knows, dominates." (P3)</p>
	<p>"The places where I usually search are blogs or some websites already dedicated specifically to that, written, in a certain way, by consumers that are interested too and know a lot about those topics." (F1)</p>
<p>Trusting social media influencers</p>	<p>"Honestly, I go to the influencers I follow on Instagram, which I trust basically." (F3)</p>
	<p>"I, I go after it, I consult a lot of websites about it, I follow some apps about, not apps, Instagram pages about more sustainable products or how I can reduce my carbon footprint." (P3)</p>
	<p>"Now that I think about it... all of the opinions I search about products and such are really YouTube videos, influencer's Instagram pages, those kind of things." (F2)</p>
<p>Seeing brands use eco-labels as part of their long-term sustainability strategy</p>	<p>"I see they are not one time actions, it is a strategy that is right, that is not being sporadic, every year they add a bit more to the sustainability strategy that I think they are creating and crossing, and very well, with the Marketing." (P3)</p>
	<p>"The brand itself, in this case Ben&Jerry, it got us accustomed to their posture... very conscious and having a set of actions, they become a sustainable company, socially fair, and effectively ends up being a conscious option." (P4)</p>
<p>Seeing how much or how little eco-label providers are</p>	<p>"I think you should be able to know how the eco-label is attributed from beginning to end. Because I want to know who is financing it, for example the label dolphin safe, I can go search online, but I think the audits of accounts</p>

transparent	should be public, for example, from the accounts of who finances these types of labels.” (F4)
	“Mainly transparency. Even a third-party entity, if they do not publicly share data they can say they act a certain way when they do not, there would not be any verification.” (P11)
	“First, always be 100% transparent in which are the criteria for assessment of the products.” (P2)

Table 11. Information validating approaches used by eco-conscious consumers
Source: Self elaboration

To summarize, Table 11 demonstrates that, when validating the information of eco-labels, consumers rely on external sources of information; research themselves when purchasing items with eco-labels; trust the opinions of their peers and other consumers; trust social media influencers; see if brands use eco-labels as part of their long-term sustainability strategy and see how transparent eco-label providers are.

Regarding the third research question, how does the attitude of eco-conscious consumers toward eco-labels influence their purchasing intention, participants displayed both positive and negative influences on purchase intention. Table 12 shows the attitudes that have a positive influence on purchase intention.

Participants revealed that they, not only prefer to purchase items with eco-labels, but are willing to pay a premium for them. The participants said this

would depend on the type of product and price, but the amount they are willing to pay ranges between as little as 5% and as much as over 100%.

Participants also admitted that part of why they purchase items with eco-labels is for selfish reasons, to feel better about themselves. If they buy certain items that have some level of environmental impact they prefer one with eco-labels that guarantee that the impact will be somewhat lower. Overall participants agreed that eco-labels help them make purchasing decisions.

Themes	Excerpts
I am willing to pay more	“For example, if something has a certificate and it is two euros I prefer it over the one euro product. It would be 50% or even... 100%.” (P1)
	“If they assure me that it is really a way, that it is in a conscious way, maybe instead of giving €1 for a tablet, maybe I would even be willing to give maybe €2.50, depending a little on the type of chocolate. More than 100% right, so it turns out to be more than twice the price.” (P4)
	“I do not have a fixed answer for that, but maybe... in products within that cheaper price range, maybe... 25% maximum. With more expensive products, like, for example those products that... between 5% to 15%. Because then it depends on the product itself, the price itself, and more.” (P11)
I prefer products with eco-labels	I prefer to take the one with the label, the certificate, than one... that doesn't have it. And if I do have to take it, it is because I really do not have any other choice.” (P1)
	“It is really simple, if it has an eco-label it is that product that I buy, if it does not, it is not that product I buy.” (P3)
	“Maybe between one that does not have an eco-label and one that does have..., I will choose the one that has, but that is because I am a consumer that values that.” (F1)
I buy products	“It is a choice that will make me..., and notice what I am going to say, it will make me feel better. This is not altruism, it is egoism.

with eco-labels for self-satisfaction	This is my head saying that you have to, okay to feel better understanding that you are drinking this glass of milk, at least choose the glass of milk that impacts the less, if I can say so, I think that I can.” (P3)
	“Because picture this, I know the harm is done, so to speak, but at least if it has a certification... I want to believe that I feel a little better.” (F1)
	“I think it is the feeling of doing something for the environment, in terms of psychology..., a certain satisfaction of contributing.” (P10)
Eco-labels help me make purchase decisions	“Ok, it is like this, overall, they all help me in my day to day to make my decisions, without a doubt.” (P3)
	“If there is a label that attests to these types of issues, or at least tries to attest to these types of issues, then yes, it will be very important in terms of the purchase decision.” (P4)
	“So yes, it in fact weighs, it weighs on, I can say over than 50% of my decisions.” (P11)

Table 12. Attitudes that have a positive influence on purchase intention
Source: Self elaboration

Table 13 displays the attitudes that have a negative influence on purchase intention. Participants admitted that some factors are still more important than eco-labels. Among them are the ingredients, calories, being a Portuguese company, being biodegradable, and others.

Furthermore, they also affirm that if they find out that an eco-label is greenwashing they stop trusting and purchasing those products. They claim they would feel betrayed and misled and would immediately disregard that eco-label, but it could also negatively influence their trust in other eco-labels. Some participants went even further and said they would completely boycott the companies involved.

Themes	Excerpts
Other factors are more important to me than eco-labels	“Usually, if it has an eco-label and it is a food product that has the ingredients that I want, I choose it, the eco-label matters too, in a way it also ends up being, it is below the ingredients. First I prioritize the ingredients that matter to me, but the eco-label is also important.” (P10)
	“I prefer to trust ecox for multiple reasons, it is a Portuguese company, from mistolin, it is a company that produces from used oils, it is one of the few to sell in bulk, it is a pioneer to really have biodegradable detergents. I prefer this scrutiny... I really prefer it, even if it does not have a certificate, than to choose for example from another brand.” (P4)
	“I wanted to say, not only the price but also the fact that we are now in a super healthy world, and even calories influence a lot.” (F3)
I stop trusting and buying a product with an eco-label if I find out they are greenwashing	“Honestly I would never even consider buying anything from the brand that did it, because here is the thing, I would feel completely betrayed. They would be using that eco-label only to sell their product, and to me, that does not, it does not make much sense.” (P2)
	“If I see that an eco-label that I had purchased up until now is not in fact fulfilling their criteria, I completely disregard them, really, I even prefer to almost boycott that company. Not only that product, but the company.” (P11)
	“I would feel misled and probably would distrust other eco-labels as well, so... the penalty would not only be to that one, but I would distrust others too.” (P10)

Table 13. Attitudes that have a negative influence on purchase intention
Source: Self elaboration

As noted previously, the participants displayed an assortment of attitudes that can directly influence their intention to purchase. Some of them

had attitudes with a positive influence, such as preferring products with eco-labels; being willing to pay more for them; buying eco-labeled products for self-satisfaction, and claiming eco-labels help them make purchase decisions.

There were however attitudes with a negative influence: other factors being more important than eco-labels and stopping to trust and buy eco-labeled products if they greenwash. The findings that were retrieved from the data collection and displayed during this chapter are valuable and relevant for this study. In the next chapter, they will be discussed in-depth.

4. DISCUSSION

Having analyzed the results in the findings chapter, this chapter will focus on the discussion of said findings, firstly by reflecting on them and their implications and then relating them to the literature. Tables 14 through 16 provide a summary of the responses to the research questions. After each one, a comprehensive assessment of these responses will ensue.

Categories	Answers
Positive	Legally regulated and closely monitored
	Trustworthy and dependable
	Genuinely eco-friendly
	Are not gatekeepers of information
Negative	Dubious and questionable
	Unconvincing and unreliable
	Might be greenwashing
	Money making schemes
	Unclear and hard to understand

Table 14. Answers to research question 1: What characteristics do eco-conscious consumers associate with eco-labels?

Source: Self Elaboration

Eco-conscious consumers' relation with eco-labels is a topic that has yet to be thoroughly researched. Therefore, it is critical to learn how eco-conscious consumers feel about eco-labels. In the setting of this study, the results indicate that eco-conscious consumers have conflicting opinions about eco-labels. As

table 14 demonstrates, a mixture of positive and negative characteristics were associated with eco-labels.

Some of the participants believe eco-labels are beneficial and claimed to have trust in them, most had reservations about eco-labels, while others entirely dismiss them. Results from this study show, according to participants, that there is a general feeling of distrust and uncertainty among eco-conscious consumers, and even the ones that claim eco-labels are trustworthy also admit to being suspicious sometimes.

According to the participants, their trust often depends on the type of eco-label, or who issued and controls it. Many participants expressed this feeling as exemplified by the quote below. This aligns with findings from the literature, which claim that consumers prefer eco-labels issued by government entities and NGOs rather than businesses (Darnall et al., 2012).

“I trust government entities the most, and for a very specific reason. A governmental entity does not have, does not need to create a business around a certification.” (P8)

Participants were very vocal about their opinions regarding eco-labels. The majority considered them to be unconvincing and unreliable. This reveals

that eco-conscious consumers take eco-labels with a grain of salt, meaning they view them as misleading or unverified and, therefore, are skeptical about them.

Likewise, participants believe eco-labels might be a greenwashing practice to mislead consumers, as well as a way for brands to make money. This reinforces that eco-conscious consumers are distrusting of eco-labels. Nevertheless, other participants also found eco-labels to be genuinely eco-friendly and concerned about the state of our planet.

It is also suggested that eco-conscious consumers might find eco-labels confusing. Participants admitted to feeling that eco-labels are not sufficiently clear and that their advantages are not being properly communicated. Previous studies also agree that eco-labels can be confusing for consumers (Delmas & Lessem, 2015).

An eco-label's main purpose is to convey a product's environmental benefits and, consequently, encourage consumers to buy said products. This generalized skepticism and confusion could mean they are not correctly fulfilling their duty.

Considering this, the results imply that companies' investments in eco-labels may be insufficient in communicating their eco-friendly products and therefore they are not taking entire advantage of them. Since intention to use and actual adoption of eco-labels is connected to trust (Darnall & Vázquez-

Brust, 2018; Gorton et al., 2021 and knowledge of eco-labels (Testa et al., 2015; Taufique et al., 2016), it is possible that this skepticism and confusion can harm purchase intention and behavior. Previous studies had similar findings, articulating that the adoption of eco-labels will be limited if distrust is projected, particularly for those with certification qualities difficult for consumers to verify from their personal experience (Gorton et al., 2021).

Not all opinions were negative, some participants had positive views on eco-labels. Findings revealed that eco-conscious consumers find it a benefit when eco-labels are legally regulated and closely monitored. This means that the fact that these eco-labels are controlled by third-party entities and have to adhere to certain requirements puts them at ease. This is consistent with previous findings (Cerchia & Piccolo, 2019).

Also on a positive note, some participants consider that eco-labels are not gatekeepers of information, despite others having the opposite opinion and viewing eco-labels as possible greenwashing. This means that, as stated by the respondents, eco-labels do not restrict access to information regarding them, and that as long as one is willing to search they will certainly be able to find plenty of information.

Since consumers’ knowledge of eco-labels directly relates to improved environmental attitudes and behaviors (Taufique et al., 2016) we can infer that eco-labels’ openness with information positively influences purchase intention. This constant battle of opinions shows once more how, in the view of the participants of this study, eco-conscious consumers are conflicted about eco-labels and have attitudes that fall on both ends of the spectrum.

Categories	Answers
Based on information and opinions	Researching when purchasing items with eco-labels
	Relying on external sources of information
	Trusting their peers’ and other consumers’ opinions.
	Trusting social media influencers
Based on actions	Seeing brands use eco-labels as part of their long-term sustainability strategy
	Seeing how much or how little eco-label providers are transparent

Table 15. Answers to research question 2: How do eco-conscious consumers validate the information on eco-labels?
Source: Self elaboration

The findings of the first research question revealed that eco-conscious consumers are often unclear about whether they should trust eco-labels, thus it is imperative to understand how they validate the information of eco-labels. The results listed in table 15 show that eco-conscious consumers validate the information in two main ways. Based on information and opinions and based on actions. These categories then unfold into the smaller steps the participants claimed to take when validating information.

The participants happily state that they do their own research when purchasing items with eco-labels, especially if they have any doubts about what is being said. They specified that when doing research, they rely on external and independent sources. They also value the opinions of their peers, other consumers, and social media influencers.

They deem these sources as more trustworthy and feel that they have more credibility than the information communicated by brands. Past findings have similar claims, and even state that when consumers are informed about eco-friendly products from sources such as social media, friends, and family as well as print they are more likely to adopt them (Suki, 2017).

Participants also mentioned that it would be nice if supermarkets did that job for them and informed consumers as the quote below demonstrates. Previous findings agree that retailers are extremely relevant as they can guide consumers' intentions and display pertinent information (Guyader et al., 2017).

"I feel that the supermarket also has an obligation to inform or instruct and to try to put things there so the consumer can see instead of having to go look for it." (F1)

All of this demonstrates that eco-conscious consumers are people who seek to make informed decisions. It also, and in line with the findings from the first research questions as well as previous studies, reinforces that eco-conscious consumers have difficulty trusting eco-labels, and feel the need to validate their information, particularly if they are not third-party certified.

As mentioned before, participants admit that they sometimes view eco-labels as greenwashing practices and money-making schemes. When asked how they validate if that is true, participants reported that it helps when eco-label providers are transparent.

The results establish that eco-conscious consumers value transparency when it comes to the process of attributing eco-labels and the criteria they use, as well as when they share data such as who finances the eco-labels. Previous findings also agree that transparency is a valuable characteristic. Kotler (2011) brings attention to the need for transparency in labeling and Gazzola et al. (2020) explain that consumers expect transparency.

Some participants also stated that another way they validate information is by seeing brands employ eco-labels as part of a sustainability strategy. This allows brands to demonstrate that eco-labels are not a gimmick designed to earn more money off eco-conscious consumers.

Previous studies did find that consumers’ perception of companies’ sustainability strategies influences purchase intention (Kong et al., 2014). Other studies say that when consumers see a gap between green advertising and actual sustainability performance it led to increased skepticism (Nyilasy et al., 2014). These results show, in a way, that the same can happen if consumers feel there is a discrepancy between eco-labels and sustainability performance.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that eco-conscious consumers take eco-labels very seriously. They make an effort to validate eco-labels’ and companies’ claims, and they do it by researching, trusting others, and by paying attention to certain actions of businesses since they believe these actions reflect firms’ true motives.

Categories	Answers
Positive influence on purchase intention	I am willing to pay more
	I prefer products with eco-labels
	I buy products with eco-labels for self-satisfaction
	Eco-labels help me make purchase decisions
Negative influence on purchase intention	Other factors are more important to me than eco-labels
	I stop trusting and buying a product with an eco-label if I find out they are greenwashing

Table 16: Answers to research question 3: How does the attitude of eco-conscious consumers towards eco-labels influence their purchasing intention?
Source: Self elaboration

The results presented in Table 16 indicate that eco-conscious consumers can have attitudes with both positive and negative influences on purchase

intention. Participants' attitudes were mostly favorable. Eco-conscious consumers actually prefer products with eco-labels, are willing to pay more for them, acquire eco-labeled products for self-satisfaction and claim eco-labels are helpful when it comes to purchase decisions. This demonstrates that eco-conscious consumers value eco-labels and that they positively influence their purchase intention.

Results show that despite participants having a generalized distrust in eco-labels, as seen earlier during this discussion, at the same time most still manifested attitudes that have a positive influence on purchase intention, such as preferring eco-labeled products. The fact that the participants believe eco-labels are greenwashing but still maintain a positive attitude towards them is contrary to previous research, which claims that when consumers perceive greenwashing they no longer have a positive attitude (Correa et al., 2017).

This interesting behavior creates a paradox between their feelings towards eco-labels and their intentions to purchase items with eco-labels. Therefore, it can be stated that eco-conscious consumers' distrust of eco-labels does not negatively influence their intention to purchase eco-labeled products.

Participants confirmed that eco-labels do really assist when they are making purchase decisions, which is consistent with previous findings (Stokes & Turri, 2015). Participants also stated that they prefer products with eco-labels, and some even went as far as to say that they only purchase items with

eco-labels. This clearly conveys that eco-conscious consumers have a really strong and positive intention to purchase products with eco-labels.

Regarding willingness to pay, participants' answers varied, but they were willing to pay as little as 5% more to over 100% more. Overall, the average willingness to pay was set at about 35%. These results are in accordance with previous findings, which also agree there is a willingness to pay (Wei et al., 2018).

Furthermore, findings show that the amount eco-conscious consumers are willing to pay depends on the type of product, as well as the price itself. These results are likewise aligned with previous findings, which claimed that consumers are willing to pay much more for lower-range priced products than for expensive products (Elliott & Freeman, 2004).

Furthermore, participants admitted to buying eco-labeled products for self-centered reasons, in order to feel better about themselves. This interesting finding demonstrates that eco-conscious consumers consider that they have a duty, the personal responsibility of lowering their impact on the planet. When justifying this behavior, participants explained that they feel guilt from acquiring less eco-friendly products but since the harm is done, they believe that having an eco-label will help.

These findings are supported by the literature, although the literature only addresses this issue in the context of ethical consumption. It is believed that consumers feel remorseful when they make unethical choices and pride when they compensate with ethical ones (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013). Results indicate that eco-conscious consumers exhibit the same type of behavior when it comes to eco-labels.

At the same time, some previous findings directly oppose the results of this study. Hailes (2007) asserts that eco-conscious consumers only buy eco-friendly products and refrain from purchasing items that they believe are harmful to the environment, which these findings show not to be true. Akehurst and Gonçalves (2012) state altruism successfully characterizes green consumer behavior, but results from this study show that eco-conscious consumers act out of selfishness.

Still, there were some negative influences, however, these attitudes are not entirely tied to the eco-labels themselves, but to other circumstances. This means that these attitudes are due to other aspects being more important to consumers, such as ingredients, as well as the involvement of actual greenwashing practices.

The findings are similar to previous ones, that state consumers also value other attributes like health, quality, and familiarity (Quintero Vargas, 2020). In addition to some of these attributes, the findings also identified

biodegradability, materials used, and whether it is from a national company as attributes eco-conscious consumers value more than eco-labels.

Valuing these specific attributes can be seen as an eco-friendly concern as well. Biodegradability protects the planet, specifically land and water; chosen materials are also important as some can be more resource intensive or less durable than others; and purchasing national products also protects the environment, as less transportation means fewer fossil fuels.

Overall, findings express that eco-conscious consumers value their health and other environmental characteristics more than eco-labels when choosing products. This means that when an eco-labeled product lacks those preferred attributes it negatively influences purchase intention, as eco-conscious consumers will prefer another product instead.

The final attitude participants displayed is to stop trusting and buying a product with an eco-label if I find out they are greenwashing, therefore it can be stated that when companies commit greenwashing eco-conscious consumers no longer have the intent to purchase their products. This is consistent with the findings from previous studies that claim greenwashing harms purchase intention (Nguyen et al., 2019).

So, in the view of this study's participants, while eco-conscious consumers' unproven distrust does not have a negative influence on purchase intention, actual proof of greenwashing completely halts their purchase intention.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The primary goal of this study was to understand how eco-labels influence eco-conscious consumers and their purchase intentions. The findings provided a deeper insight into how eco-conscious consumers perceive eco-labels, the attitudes they have towards them, and how that influences their purchase intention of eco-labeled products.

Eco-conscious consumers associate different characteristics with eco-labels, positive and negative, but one thing that is common amongst most is distrust. The main positive characteristics that were identified are legally regulated and closely monitored; trustworthy and dependable; fully committed to the environmental cause; honest and open with information. The main negative ones are dubious and questionable; unconvincing and unreliable; might be greenwashing; money-making schemes; unclear and hard to understand.

The main findings retrieved from these characteristics are that eco-conscious consumers have conflicting opinions on eco-labels and that skepticism and confusion are very clearly present in most eco-conscious consumers, even in the ones who claim to trust eco-labels.

It is also determined that eco-labels may not be properly fulfilling their duties of communicating products' environmental benefits. Lastly, it is seen that eco-conscious consumers trust certain types of eco-labels more than others, especially if they are third-party certified or issued by government entities.

When eco-conscious consumers validate the information of eco-labels they do their own research and rely on external sources of information when doing so. They also put trust in the opinions of their peers, other consumers as well as some social media influencers. They also have another, less obvious way of validation. By seeing how brands use eco-labels as part of their long-term sustainability strategy and by seeing how transparent eco-label providers are.

The main findings show that eco-conscious consumers are people that attempt to make informed decisions when it comes to purchases, and they view external sources as more credible than information communicated by brands. They also pay attention to the actions of companies because they believe these actions reveal the genuine motivations of firms.

Finally, when it comes to the attitudes of eco-conscious consumers and how they influence purchasing intention, there is a mix of attitudes with a positive and negative influence on purchasing intention. On the positive side eco-conscious consumers prefer products with eco-labels and are willing to pay

more for them, they buy eco-labeled products out of self-satisfaction and admit that eco-labels help them make purchase decisions. On the negative side, eco-conscious consumers say other factors are more important than eco-labels for them, and they also stop trusting and buying a product with an eco-label if they find it to be greenwashing.

The main finding is surprisingly a paradox between attitude and intention. It was found that eco-conscious consumers' distrust of eco-labels does not negatively influence their intention to purchase products with eco-labels. It was also found that eco-conscious consumers have a strong, positive intention to purchase eco-labeled products.

Findings showed that eco-conscious consumers have a sense of responsibility towards the planet in which they must lower their personal impact. Regarding the negative attitudes, results showed that eco-conscious consumers value other attributes, especially health and environment related, more than eco-labels alone.

Findings also very clearly state that purchase intention is completely shattered when eco-conscious consumers find out companies are greenwashing. Therefore, eco-conscious consumers' unproven skepticism has no detrimental influence on purchase intention, whereas genuine proof of greenwashing fully inhibits their purchase intention.

This study's practical contributions are presented below, in the shape of recommendations to companies with eco-labeled products or with plans to incorporate eco-labels into their sustainability strategy, as well as eco-label providers.

- Companies should disregard uncertified labels and switch to third-party certifications, as well as focus on obtaining government and NGO-issued eco-labels, as these types are the ones eco-conscious consumers trust the most;
- Communication regarding eco-labels and their environmental benefits needs to be improved by companies in order to take full advantage of them, as eco-conscious consumers are often skeptical and confused about eco-labels;
- Eco-label providers should work with social media influencers as partnerships to create content about the eco-labels, as information from these sources is more trusted by eco-conscious consumers;
- Transparency regarding eco-labels' criteria and funding is a must for companies, as well as eco-label providers if they hope to gain the trust of eco-conscious consumers;
- Companies need to assure they have a solid and long-term sustainability strategy otherwise their motives for having eco-labels will be questioned;

- Companies can make sure their products fulfill their target consumers' desired requirements in terms of health and other environmental attributes in addition to having the eco-label;
- Both companies and eco-label providers should refrain from practicing greenwashing in any way or form;

The findings obtained from this study have practical implications for businesses as well as eco-label providers. Marketing professionals can take many insights from the results of this study and apply the above recommendations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study has implications in the academic world, the results bring researchers closer to understanding eco-conscious consumers' behavior. They add valuable knowledge to the field and make room for additional investigation.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter will introduce the limitations of this study as well as some recommendations for future research.

As with the majority of studies, the findings of this study are subject to some limitations. The first one is related to the diversity of participants. During the focus group, all participants had similar ages. Different age groups can have different perspectives and therefore encourage dialog, however, it was unfortunately not possible to accomplish.

The second limitation is that all data collection had to be online, due to the covid-19 pandemic. Despite the restrictions having been lifted, people are still cautious towards in-person meetings, especially in a setting with multiple people, as was the case of the focus group. As people have grown accustomed to meetings online, they were also less willing to do them in person.

While this study meant to understand the attitudes and purchase intention of eco-conscious consumers towards eco-labels, future research should focus on making the connection between intention and behavior.

Previous research determined the existence of an attitude-behavior gap in the context of ethical consumption (Davies et al., 2012), and there are

conflicting opinions on whether it occurs in the setting of eco-labels (Doksaeter and Nordman, 2019; Aneshansley, 2021; Riskos et al., 2021). It is necessary to understand if this phenomenon occurs when it comes to eco-conscious consumers' purchase behavior of eco-labels.

Future research could also employ different qualitative techniques, such as observation, as those techniques are successful in not only understanding how consumers behave but also why they behave the way they do (Bell, 2005).

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