

The Green Symphony: A Phenomenological Study of Environmental Awareness and Green Purchase Decisions Among Women in MSMEs

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the environmental awareness of women who are owners and employees of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar City and its influence on their green product purchase decisions. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research involved six participants selected through purposive sampling: three MSME owners and three employees who actively make purchasing decisions related to business operations. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review. Thematic analysis following the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model was employed, with data validity ensured through source triangulation and member checking. The findings reveal four major themes: (1) multilevel environmental awareness encompassing individual, social, and institutional dimensions; (2) green purchase decision-making process driven by intrinsic values and contextual factors; (3) barriers to green consumption including price sensitivity, limited product availability, and information asymmetry; and (4) the role of women's leadership within MSME ecosystems as catalysts for sustainable consumption practices. This research contributes theoretically to the green consumer behavior literature by integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and value-belief-norm theory within an Indonesian MSME context. Practically, the findings have implications for sustainability-oriented human resource management in small enterprises and inform policy frameworks supporting green economic transformation in emerging markets.

Keywords: Environmental Awareness, Green Purchase Decision, Women, MSMEs, Phenomenology.

1. Introduction

The increasingly intensifying ecological pressures of the 21st century have driven a paradigm shift in consumption globally, from an extractive linear model to a sustainability-oriented circular consumption pattern. In this context, the role of the individual as an actor of consumption can no longer be ignored, given that the purchasing decisions made on a daily basis in aggregate contribute significantly to the carbon footprint and ecological burden (Chen et al., 2021). The phenomenon of global warming, biodiversity degradation, and the clean water crisis are a collective reminder that transforming consumption behavior is an urgent need, not just a strategic choice.

Indonesia, as a country with a population of more than 270 million people and an ever-increasing rate of urbanization, faces double pressures: consumption-dependent economic



growth on the one hand, and the urgency of the ecological transition on the other. The city of Makassar as the center of economic growth in the Eastern Region of Indonesia reflects these dynamics micro. The Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) sector in Makassar absorbs more than 70% of the local workforce and contributes significantly to the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GDP), but at the same time it is the most vulnerable entity to the pressure of increasingly stringent environmental regulations (Makassar City Central Statistics Agency, 2023).

In the midst of these dynamics, women play roles that are often ignored academically. Various studies show that women are not only the dominant consumption decision-makers in households, but also in the managerial and operational context of MSMEs (Zhu et al., 2022; Mostafa, 2022). In the Makassar MSME ecosystem, women are present in two capacities: as business owners who determine procurement policies and as employees who carry out daily purchasing practices. This dual capacity makes MSME women a strategic subject in the study of green consumption transition.

Recent empirical phenomena show significant growth in the market segment of environmentally friendly products in Indonesia. A Nielsen survey (2022) revealed that 73% of Indonesian consumers expressed a willingness to pay more for sustainable products, but the gap between intentions and actual actions remains wide, a phenomenon known in the literature as the green attitude-behavior gap (Joshi & Rahman, 2021). This gap is particularly relevant in the context of MSMEs operating under cost pressures and information limitations.

A systematic review of the existing literature identified a number of significant research gaps. First, most research on green consumer behavior has focused on individual consumers in developed countries, with limited representation of the context of MSMEs in developing countries (Wang et al., 2022). Second, existing studies generally adopt quantitative approaches that ignore the depth of experience and subjective meaning behind green purchasing decisions (Hwang & Choi, 2022). Third, the gender dimension in green decision-making at the micro-organization level is still very rarely explored in depth (Zhu et al., 2022). Fourth, the context of Eastern Indonesia, especially Makassar, is almost completely absent from the international research map on sustainable consumption.

The urgency of this research is supported by the global agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production, and SDG 5 on gender equality. An in-depth understanding of how women in Makassar MSMEs interpret, internalize, and articulate environmental awareness in daily purchasing practices not only has academic value, but also concrete policy relevance.

Based on the description above, this study aims to: (1) explore the construction of the meaning of environmental awareness in women MSME owners and employees in Makassar City; (2) understand the processes and factors that affect the purchase decision of environmentally friendly products in the operational context of MSMEs; (3) identify barriers and drivers of green consumption in the MSME ecosystem; and (4) analyze the implications of the findings for sustainability-oriented MSME human resource management.

2. Literature Review

Environmental awareness has become a key determinant of sustainable consumption behavior, particularly in the context of environmentally friendly product purchases. Green consumer behavior literature suggests that individuals with stronger environmental concerns are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward sustainable products and engage in responsible purchasing practices (Ghali-Zinoubi, 2023; Wang et al., 2022). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) further explains that green purchase decisions are influenced by

attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, all of which shape consumers' intentions and actions toward environmentally responsible consumption (Ajzen & Sheikh, 2021; Joshi & Rahman, 2021).

Previous studies have also highlighted the important role of women in promoting sustainable consumption. Women tend to demonstrate higher levels of environmental concern and stronger intentions to purchase green products due to altruistic values, social responsibility, and concern for future generations (Mostafa, 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). In addition, social influence and green trust have been identified as significant drivers of environmentally friendly purchasing behavior, particularly when consumers perceive environmental claims as credible and authentic (Kim & Hall, 2021; Prakash et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of research, important gaps remain. Most studies have focused on consumers in developed countries and have primarily employed quantitative methods, limiting the understanding of how environmental awareness is constructed and experienced in everyday life (Garg & Verma, 2023; Hwang & Choi, 2022). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to women working in MSMEs and to the unique socio-cultural context of developing regions such as Eastern Indonesia. Therefore, a qualitative exploration is needed to better understand how environmental awareness influences green purchasing decisions among women in the MSME ecosystem of Makassar City.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design to explore how women working in MSMEs interpret environmental awareness and green product purchasing decisions. Grounded in Husserlian phenomenology and the work of Moustakas (1994), the study adopted an interpretivist paradigm that views social reality as subjective and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2022). The research was conducted in Makassar City, Indonesia, selected due to its dynamic MSME ecosystem, the presence of women-led enterprises, and the limited representation of similar studies in the international literature.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of six women actively involved in MSME purchasing decisions, including three owners and three employees. Data saturation was achieved after six interviews, consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and sustainability-related practices.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), involving data condensation, coding, theme development, and conclusion verification. To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation and member checking were applied, while reflexivity journaling was used to document and manage potential researcher bias throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis resulted in four main themes with each subtheme reflecting the informant's experience comprehensively. Table 1 presents a summary of the structure of the research findings.

Table 1. Structure of Themes and Subthemes of Research Results

No.	Main Themes	Subtheme	Short Description
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1	Layered Environmental Awareness	1a. Personal Awareness 1b. Social Awareness 1c. Institutional Awareness	1b. Construction of environmental meaning at the level of individuals, communities, and MSME organizations
2	Green Purchasing Decision Process	2a. Intrinsic Value Triggers 2b. Contextual Factors 2c. Evaluation of Green Alternatives	Internal and external dynamics that shape the purchase decision of eco-friendly products
3	Green Consumption Barriers	3a. Price Sensitivity 3b. Limited Access 3c. Information Asymmetry	Structural and personal barriers that hinder the realization of green purchasing intent
4	The Role of Women's Leadership	4a. Internal Change Agents 4b. The Influence of Social Networks 4c. Collaborative Decision Making	The contribution of women as transformative actors in the MSME consumption ecosystem

Theme 1: Layered Environmental Awareness

All informants expressed environmental awareness that was not single, but layered and interacted at three levels of analysis. On a personal level, environmental awareness is constructed through direct experience with the impact of climate change and the internalization of values sourced from the Bugis-Makassar cultural context that emphasizes harmony between humans and nature (*siri' na pacce* as the ethical foundation of social and ecological behavior).

Informant IP2, a culinary business owner who uses biodegradable packaging, revealed the following: "I began to be very aware of the environment when I saw for myself the condition of Losari Beach which is getting dirtier. Not because I read books or participated in seminars, but because every morning I pass by there and feel ashamed of myself if my business contributes plastic waste" (IP2, interview, March 15, 2024). This statement reflects what Stern et al. (in Wang et al., 2022) call experiential environmental concern, which is concern triggered by direct contact with environmental degradation.

At the social level, environmental awareness is strengthened through subjective norms in the MSME women's network. The IK3 informant described this dynamic: "In the WhatsApp group of fellow female traders, now there are often people who share about products that are more environmentally friendly. If close friends have used it, we feel left behind if we don't participate" (IK3, interview, March 22, 2024). This phenomenon is consistent with the mechanisms of social contagion in pro-environmental behavior identified by Hwang and Choi (2022).

At the institutional level, three out of six informants attributed environmental awareness to increasing regulatory pressures and consumer expectations. The IP1 informant stated: "Now consumers, especially young ones, have started to ask: is this a product environmentally friendly? The packaging is recyclable, isn't it? If we can't answer, they choose another place" (IP1, interview, March 18, 2024).

Theme 2: Green Purchasing Decision Process

Analysis of the informant's narrative revealed that the decision to purchase environmentally friendly products in the context of MSMEs does not follow a linear rational model, but is iterative and influenced by the interaction between intrinsic value, contextual factors, and the evaluation of available alternatives.

The most dominant intrinsic value is the identity as a woman who is responsible for future generations. The IP3 informant revealed: "I have two daughters. Every time I want to buy something for the store, I think: if it becomes garbage, my child will live with the

consequences. That's what makes me more careful" (IP3, interview, March 20, 2024). This motivation based on future generations orientation is in line with the findings of Mostafa (2022) who identified intergenerational altruism as a strong predictor of green consumer behavior in women.

The most frequently mentioned contextual factors are product availability and financial support. Four out of six informants stated that the limited operational budget of MSMEs is often the main consideration that overrides environmental preferences. The IK1 informant stated: "I want to use something that is environmentally friendly, but if the price is double the usual one, it is also difficult. We are not a big company that has a CSR budget" (IK1, interview, March 25, 2024).

Theme 3: Barriers to Green Consumption

Three main structural barriers were identified from the cross-case analysis. First, price sensitivity is the most universal and consistent obstacle raised by all informants. The premium price of green products, which ranges from 15 to 40 percent higher than conventional alternatives, directly collides with the logic of cost efficiency that is the mantra of MSME sustainability.

Second, limited access to the distribution network of environmentally friendly products reflects the gap in green market infrastructure in Makassar compared to big cities in Java. The IP2 informant revealed: "In Jakarta, just click on the marketplace there are already hundreds of eco-friendly product options. Here we have to look for it ourselves, often out of stock, or the shipping is very expensive because we have to send from outside the island" (IP2, interview, March 15, 2024).

Third, information asymmetry creates uncertainty in the evaluation of product environmental claims. The IK2 informant stated: "I don't know how to tell the difference between which ones are really environmentally friendly and which ones are just labels. Many say it is eco-friendly but there is no certification. Finally, we are confused and return to the usual ones" (IK2, interview, March 28, 2024). This phenomenon of greenwashing skepticism is consistent with the findings of Joshi and Rahman (2021) who identified distrust of green claims as a significant inhibitor to the conversion of intention into behavior.

Theme 4: The Role of Women's Leadership

The most original finding of this study is the identification of the role of women as active agents of change in the MSME consumption ecosystem. Beyond their role as passive consumers, informants who own MSMEs have been proven to actively transfer environmental values to their employees and business networks.

The IP1 informant described the practice: "I always explain to the employees why we choose this supplier instead of that. I also tell our subscribers why our packaging is different. Slowly, they began to understand and some finally began to apply it in their own businesses" (IP1, interview, March 18, 2024). This pattern reflects the transformational green leadership mechanisms identified by Chen et al. (2021) in a broader organizational context.

4.1. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings in a Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study make a substantive contribution to the development of green consumer behavior theory in two main dimensions. First, the layered conceptualization of

environmental awareness identified in this study expands the construct of environmental awareness from the individual realm to a multidimensional understanding that integrates social and institutional factors. This theoretically enriches the framework of Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen, where subjective norms and perceived behavioral control operate more complex when analyzed in the context of interconnected MSME ecosystems (Joshi & Rahman, 2021; Kim & Hall, 2021).

Second, the integration of value-belief-norm (VBN) theory from Stern et al. with a gender perspective resulted in a more nuanced understanding of why women in the context of Makassar MSMEs show different patterns of green awareness and decisions than men and general consumers. Altruistic values rooted in the identity of mothers and community leaders, combined with beliefs about environmental consequences, form strong personal norms that then encourage green purchasing intentions and behaviors despite structural barriers (Mostafa, 2022; Zhu et al., 2022).

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings on the green attitude-behavior gap in the context of Makassar MSMEs are in line with the results of research by Joshi and Rahman (2021) who found a similar gap in consumers in developing countries, but with different mechanisms. If in their context the main obstacle is distrust of environmental claims, this study reveals that in Makassar price barriers and limited distribution access have a more dominant weight. This difference reflects the importance of geographical and economic contextualization in green consumer behavior research.

The discovery of the transformative role of women as agents of green change in the MSME ecosystem is an original contribution that has not been explicitly identified in the existing literature. Chen et al. (2021) identified transformational green leadership in the corporate context, while this study shows that similar mechanisms operate organically in informal networks of women-led MSMEs. Wang et al. (2022) in their meta-analysis identified social influence as a strong predictor of green behavior, but did not specifically examine the dynamics of informal leadership at the MSME level.

The information asymmetry barriers found in this study resonate strongly with the findings of Hwang and Choi (2022) on greenwashing skepticism, but with an additional dimension in the form of limited environmental literacy caused by limited exposure to scientific information in local languages. These findings have important implications for green product communication strategies in the Indonesian market.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study proposes a new conceptualization in the form of the Green MSME Ecosystem Framework that integrates three levels of analysis (individual-social-institutional) with gender-based moderation variables and local cultural contexts. This framework has the potential to be the foundation for the development of environmental awareness measurement instruments that are more sensitive to the context of MSMEs in developing countries.

Practically, the implications for MSME human resource management include three aspects. First, the development of an environmental awareness training program designed specifically for the context of MSMEs, using a peer learning approach that utilizes women's informal networks that have proven to be effective as a channel for the diffusion of green values. Second, strengthening the capacity of women MSME leaders as green champions through commercially recognized mentoring and certification programs. Third, the

development of a community-based incentive system that lowers the price threshold for the adoption of environmentally friendly products, for example through collective purchasing schemes or green procurement cooperatives.

5. Conclusion

This research has succeeded in exploring in depth environmental awareness and the dynamics of purchasing decisions for environmentally friendly products for women in the MSME ecosystem of Makassar City. The main findings of the study summarize four critical dimensions: first, environmental awareness in informants is multilevel, encompassing a personal dimension reinforced by cultural identity, a social dimension mediated by women's informal networks, and an institutional dimension that responds to market and regulatory pressures. Second, the green purchasing decision process is not linear, but rather a dynamic negotiation between intrinsic value and contextual constraints. Third, three major structural barriers hinder the conversion of intent into action: price sensitivity, limited distribution access, and information asymmetry. Fourth, women in the MSME ecosystem play a role not only as consumers, but as agents of transformative change who diffuse sustainability values through informal leadership networks.

The contribution of this research is twofold: theoretically, expanding the construction of green consumer behavior with the gender dimension and the context of MSMEs in Eastern Indonesia; methodologically, demonstrating the productivity of phenomenological approaches in uncovering the complexity of consumption experiences that are not reached by conventional survey instruments.

6. References

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