Consumer Awareness and Perception of Green Consumption in Sri Lanka Through the Lens of Green Governmentality

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Abstract

This study critically examines how green governmentality and responsibilization shape consumer awareness and perceptions of green consumption in Sri Lanka. Through qualitative research spanning five urban and five rural districts, the study reveals significant disparities in how green consumption is conceptualized, practiced, and governed across socioeconomic and geographical contexts. Urban consumers increasingly adopt globalized green consumption narratives promoted through media and corporate marketing, while rural populations engage with environmental responsibility through cultural frameworks that predate formal green governance mechanisms. The research uncovers a paradoxical phenomenon where absence of formal green governance in rural areas coincides with more environmentally sustainable practices, challenging dominant market-based approaches to green consumption. Economic constraints emerge as the most significant barrier to green consumption, creating fundamental limitations for lower and middle-income participants despite environmental awareness. Trust deficits toward institutional environmental claims further complicate consumer engagement with green initiatives. By documenting how consumers strategically navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist their assigned environmental roles, the study advances theoretical understanding of green governmentality in developing contexts characterized by structural inequalities. These findings challenge reductionist assumptions that position consumer awareness as a direct trigger of pro-environmental behavior, highlighting instead the need for governance approaches that address structural barriers while leveraging existing cultural frameworks that already align with green consumption principles. The research contributes to environmental governance scholarship by revealing how alternative green practices operate extensively in rural areas, often unrecognized within formal green consumption frameworks.

Keywords: Green Governmentality, Responsibilization, Green Consumption, Environmental Governance, Urban-Rural Disparity

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
CAA	Consumer Affairs Authority
CCC	Ceylon Chamber of Commerce
CEA	Central Environmental Authority
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EDB	Export Development Board
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GBCSL	Green Building Council of Sri Lanka
GOTS	Global Organic Textile Standard
LEED	Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design
MSC	Marine Stewardship Council
NCPC	National Cleaner Production Centre
NGLS	National Green Labelling System
SCP	Sustainable Consumption and Production
SLSEA	Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority
SLSI	Sri Lanka Standards Institution
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization

1. Introduction

Sustainability governance has shifted from top-down centralized regulatory approaches towards decentralized approaches oriented more towards the market, transferring a large amount of responsibility to the individual consumer. This conceptualization of sustainability governance embraces a new modality of power and productivity, one aligned with the parameters set by the neoliberalism in which environmental governance is refracted through eco-labelling, CSR incentives, policy incentives, initiatives, or sustainability campaigns (Teneta-Skwiercz, 2020). This shift reconstitutes consumers as ethical agents, imbued with the duty to alleviate environmental harms through their consumption choices. This responsibilization of individuals raises important epistemological and ethical questions, especially concerning the structural limits to consumer agency as well as socio-economic inequalities, cultural dispositions, and institutional power asymmetries (Carlson and Palmer, 2016). According to Sethi (2022), this presumption of sustainability as an intrinsically voluntary and rational action neglects the deeply embedded socio-political and economic structures steering consumer behavior, thus requiring a more nuanced interrogation of how green governmentality functions in distinct socio-economic settings.

While state-promoted environmental policies, corporate sustainability efforts, and media advocacy have all contributed to this trend, the topic of sustainable consumption in Sri Lanka has become an increasingly salient issue (Boyagoda, 2017). But what consumers do in relation to their mandated role as 'responsible' environmental subjects—how they contest, negotiate, comply, etc—is a more lithe area of scholarship. It is a disputed claim that more exposure to discourses of sustainability—particularly in urban environments—results in or leads to more pro-environmental behaviours (Peattie, 2010). Urban consumers are more commonly targeted, both by campaigns promoting sustainability and by green corporate branding, whilst rural communities practice more traditional conservation methods that do not neatly fit societal definitions of green/destructive behaviours. Fifield (2020) discussed that, this urban-rural divide also raises questions about the effectiveness, scope, and ideological underpinnings of these discourses of sustainability, asking if they open spaces for meaningful environmental action or perpetuate a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility.

This study reflects critically upon the nexus of consumer consciousness, perception and experience regarding sustainable consumption practices within Sri Lanka. As discussed by Soneryd and Uggla (2015), using the theoretical concepts of "Green governmentality" and "Responsibilization", this research will examine the discursive and structural mechanisms of how sustainability is defined and exercised by governance institutions, corporate strategies, and everyday consumer

behaviours. In doing so, I aim to challenge reductive discourses of consumer responsibility by shedding light on the socio-economic, political and cultural contingencies through which green consumption is mediated and that, in turn, foreground wider inequities and power dynamics in the environmental governance landscape. In addition, viewing sustainability from a comparative urban-rural perspective, this contribution challenges the mainstream sustainability narrative and demonstrates that alternative forms of ecological stewardship can defy or subvert more formal green governance regimes.

1.1 Research Objectives and Questions

This thesis pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore Sri Lankan consumers' conceptualizations and practice of green consumption in relation to government policies, corporate sustainability discourses, media representations.
2. To analyse the degree to which the consumer adopts, negotiates or resists their position as a 'responsible' environmental actor, identifying significant socio-political and economic factors that drive these reactions.
3. To explore the barriers and enablers (e.g., economic, cultural and psychological) that influence consumers' engagement with sustainable consumption.
4. To assess the effectiveness of existing governance strategies such as eco-labeling, sustainability incentives and corporate green marketing in influencing green consumer behavior.

Therefore, the following primary questions will be examined in this research:

1. In Sri Lanka, how do government policies, corporate sustainability campaigns, and media narratives shape consumer awareness and attitudes toward sustainable consumption?
2. How do Sri Lankan consumers embrace, challenge, refuse or struggle against the governing logics of environmental responsibilization and under what conditions?
3. What are the key structural factors and incentives that shape sustainable consumption practices in Sri Lanka?
4. To what extent are existing governance mechanisms effective in contributing to sustainable consumption, and how do these strategies function in urban and rural contexts?

1.2 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the important discussion on sustainability governance by analyzing the political economy of green consumption, the social and economic limitations on consumer agency, and the power relations that are embedded in discourses of environmental governance. The findings contest the reductionist assumptions that consider consumer awareness a direct catalyst of favorable environmental behavior but reveal how consumers' engagement is conditioned by broader ideological, structural, and economic factors. The inclusion of rural concerns challenges urban assumptions of sustainability and highlights the need to recognize alternative, Indigenous and informal ecological practices that may lie outside dominant definitions of governance.

From a policy perspective, the study provides a critical overview of existing strategies towards sustainability, and the need to grapple with the multiple consequences of a structural approach that I argue needs to be sensitive to various inequalities in a particular cultural and social context, as well as to relevant economic disparities. Furthermore, this research warns practitioners about consumer skepticism toward corporate sustainability superficiality, greenwashing, corporate accountability, and sustainability commodification. By pointing to the constructed and contested nature of green consumption, this study aspires to reframe sustainability as a site of negotiation, power, and struggle, not an uncontested space of individual responsibility.

1.3 Scope and Rationale for Urban-Rural Focus

Although the main target of this study is urban consumers, who are more exposed to the sustainability discourse through corporate, media and policy lenses, the rural context is not disregarded. Sustainable Sri Lanka is not subordinate to green governmentalities, as witnessed in liberal urban societies, but rather epitomizes the messy agencies and entanglements of sustainability in rural Sri Lanka (Munasinghe, 2009). This tension evokes an analysis of the seeming contradiction of rural sustainable practices among communities who, upon closer inspection, are less exposed to sustainable discourses than purportedly urban green governance: where less top-down green governance is (or seems to be) more green. Additionally, urban consumers typically have socio-economic and cultural ties to rural economies, indicating that their understandings could be influenced by both formal sustainability governance and informal ecological knowledge (Akkoyunlu, 2015). This imparts a comparative dimension which engages a more nuanced and a contextually grounded analysis of sustainability governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Green Consumption: Market Rationality vs. Structural Constraints

Green consumption is commonly defined as the adoption of environmentally responsible purchasing and lifestyle choices, often characterized by selecting eco-friendly products, reducing waste, and prioritizing ethical brands (Peattie, 2010). Within environmental economics and consumer behavior literature, this perspective assumes that given adequate information, incentives, and product availability, consumers will act rationally to minimize their environmental impact (Testa et al., 2021). Such frameworks underpin global sustainability policies that leverage consumer choice as a primary mechanism for achieving ecological balance, reinforcing the idea that environmental responsibility is largely a function of individual purchasing power (Tripathi and Singh, 2016).

However, according to Testa et al. (2021), adopting a more critical approach argue that this emphasis on consumer agency masks deeper structural issues, particularly those related to corporate sustainability failures, inadequate regulatory oversight, and socio-economic disparities. For instance, a study conducted by O'Rourke et al. (2015), assessing the impact of structural changes on sustainable consumption highlights the challenges in quantifying the effects of systemic transformations, emphasizing that individual actions alone are insufficient without addressing broader political and economic structures (Peattie, 2010). Green consumption is often positioned as an aspirational lifestyle that is economically viable only for privileged groups, excluding those who may lack the financial means to participate in market-driven sustainability initiatives (Argüelles, 2021). Moreover, the author explains, this framing downplays the role of governments and corporations in driving environmental degradation, shifting the burden of sustainability onto consumers while allowing institutional actors to evade systemic reform.

2.2 Consumer Dynamics in Green Consumption

2.2.1 Consumer Behavior and Its Limitations in Achieving Sustainability

Consumer behavior is frequently cited as a crucial determinant of sustainability outcomes, with Young et al. (2010) arguing that conscious consumption can reshape market trends, incentivize corporate accountability, and foster large-scale environmental change. This logic underpins sustainability campaigns that promote green consumerism as an accessible and scalable solution to climate change and

ecological crises. Proponents argue that as demand for sustainable products grows, industries will be forced to transition toward more ethical and eco-friendly business models, creating a self-regulating cycle of sustainability (Kopnina, 2017).

Yet, this perspective has been widely contested for its overestimation of consumer agency and its failure to account for the socio-economic barriers that dictate consumption choices (Argüelles, 2021). Studies indicate that financial constraints, cultural consumption norms, and lack of trust in corporate sustainability claims frequently prevent individuals from adopting green consumption behaviors, particularly in lower-income and marginalized communities (Carrete et al., 2012; Tan et al., 2016). For example, research on consumer behavior in Saudi Arabia reveals that while media and peer influence can activate motivations for green consumption, financial resources and the availability of renewable resources significantly impact actual sustainable consumption practices (Alsulami et al., 2024). Furthermore, the emphasis on consumer choice diverts attention away from the systemic economic structures that reinforce unsustainable production and overconsumption, calling into question the efficacy of market-driven environmental solutions (Tan et al., 2016).

2.2.2 Market-Driven Green Consumption vs. Pro-Environmental Behaviors

A key distinction must be made between market-driven green consumption and pro-environmental behaviors, as these terms are often conflated within mainstream sustainability discourses. Market-driven green consumption refers to consumer participation in sustainability through purchasing decisions, such as choosing organic products, eco-certified brands, or electric vehicles, largely shaped by corporate green marketing and branding strategies (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2021). This mode of engagement reinforces capitalist sustainability frameworks, where individuals are expected to consume their way toward environmental responsibility rather than demanding systemic structural change (Sheth et al., 2011).

By contrast, pro-environmental behaviors encompass a broader range of sustainability actions, including waste reduction, energy conservation, collective activism, and alternative modes of production and consumption that do not rely on market participation (Farrow et al., 2017; Tian and Liu, 2022). The authors further explain that these behaviors often emerge from grassroots sustainability movements, community-led conservation efforts, and traditional ecological knowledge systems, many of which exist outside formalized green governance frameworks.

This distinction is particularly relevant in Sri Lanka, where many rural communities engage in sustainability practices that align with pro-environmental

behaviors rather than market-driven green consumption (Konalingam et al., 2024). Traditional practices such as organic farming, resource conservation, and material reuse demonstrate a historically embedded form of ecological consciousness, yet these practices are often excluded from corporate and state-led sustainability narratives (Gunarathne et al., 2020; Konalingam et al., 2024). The failure to recognize and integrate these indigenous sustainability models into formal green consumption frameworks raises critical concerns about whose sustainability efforts are legitimized, and whose are marginalized (Konalingam et al., 2024).

2.2.3 The Urban-Rural Divide in Green Consumption

The urban-rural divide significantly influences how green consumption is conceptualized, accessed, and practiced. For an example, Dąbrowski et al. (2022), show that, urban consumers are disproportionately targeted by government sustainability campaigns, corporate green marketing, and global sustainability narratives, reinforcing a market-centric vision of green consumption. These consumers have greater access to eco-labeled products, government incentives for sustainable living, and awareness campaigns that encourage green consumerism as an ethical and desirable choice. This has been evident in studies from various global contexts (Nautiyal and Lal, 2023). For instance, research in China has demonstrated that urban populations exhibit higher engagement with green consumption due to their exposure to sustainability discourse and accessibility to eco-friendly products (Anser et al., 2024). Similarly, in the European Union, urban consumers are more likely to incorporate sustainability into their purchasing decisions due to the prevalence of green policies and corporate sustainability branding (Nekmahmud et al., 2022).

Conversely, in rural areas, sustainability is often an inherent practice rather than a deliberate consumer choice. Many rural communities engage in environmentally conscious behaviors out of necessity rather than ideological commitment to green consumption (Dąbrowski et al., 2022). Traditional ecological practices such as organic farming, composting, and the reuse of materials are widespread in many rural economies (Li et al., 2019). Research conducted by Hoffmann (2018), in the U.S. state of New Mexico highlights how rural agricultural communities adopt organic farming not as a sustainability initiative but as an affordable and historically ingrained practice, contrasting with urban green consumers who participate in sustainability through premium-priced eco-friendly products. This underscores the problematic nature of green consumption discourses that fail to acknowledge pre-existing sustainability practices outside of corporate-driven green markets.

Furthermore, disparities in infrastructure and market accessibility deepen the urban-rural divide in green consumption. Urban consumers have better access to

sustainable products due to well-developed retail networks, government sustainability programs, and waste management systems that facilitate responsible consumption. In contrast, rural consumers may lack access to eco-friendly alternatives, and even when such options are available, they are often prohibitively expensive (Dąbrowski et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2014). A research study from Africa indicate that while rural populations may be more dependent on sustainable farming and natural resource conservation, they lack formal market access to certified eco-friendly goods and sustainability incentives, reinforcing economic disparities between urban and rural green consumers (Ozor and Amudavi, 2021).

Beyond these practical constraints, there is also a deep-seated perception that sustainability governance primarily caters to urban, middle-class interests, often neglecting the needs and realities of rural populations (Kotsila et al., 2023). This is reflected in the way policies and corporate sustainability initiatives are designed and implemented. In Sri Lanka, for instance, sustainability initiatives such as plastic bans and eco-labeling schemes are primarily enforced in urban centers, whereas rural communities often lack access to the infrastructure required to comply with these regulations (Heisler, 2004). This imbalance leads to a paradox where those who practice sustainability in informal, non-market ways are excluded from mainstream green consumption narratives, while urban consumers with greater purchasing power are positioned as the primary drivers of sustainability (Kotsila et al., 2023; Tani et al., 2016).

2.3 Structural and Institutional Influences on Green Consumption

2.3.1 Role of Government Policies and Incentives in Shaping Green Consumption

Sri Lanka has embarked on a concerted journey to promote green consumption, leveraging a suite of government policies and incentives aimed at curbing environmental degradation (Sooriyaarachchi, 2024). The National Policy on SCP, introduced in 2019, provides a strategic framework to integrate environmental concerns into economic and social development. It emphasizes the need to transition towards a circular economy, where resources are efficiently used, reused, and recycled, reducing environmental impact (Ministry of Environment, 2019). This policy encourages industries to adopt sustainable production methods and consumers to shift towards eco-friendly products. However, its effectiveness depends on proper enforcement and public participation, as many consumers and businesses still lack awareness of its long-term benefits (Tissera et al., 2017).

In line with promoting sustainability, the Sri Lanka Electricity Act, No. 36 of 2024 aims to restructure the energy sector to encourage renewable energy and

improve efficiency. The government has set an ambitious target of achieving 70% electricity generation from renewable sources by 2030 (Nizam, 2025). This act facilitates private sector involvement in renewable energy projects, making it easier for independent power producers to contribute to the national grid. While this policy is a crucial step in reducing reliance on fossil fuels, challenges remain, particularly in terms of infrastructure investment and the need for a stable and efficient grid system to support large-scale renewable energy integration (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2024).

The SLSEA, established in 2007, plays a key role in promoting renewable energy and energy conservation initiatives. SLSEA has introduced various programs, such as the Net Metering Scheme, which allows solar power users to sell excess electricity back to the grid, providing both financial and environmental incentives. It also supports industries in adopting energy-efficient technologies and offers grants and subsidies for clean energy projects. By 2023, nearly 25% of Sri Lanka's electricity came from renewable sources, a figure that continues to grow (Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority, 2015). Beyond promoting renewable energy, Sri Lanka has also focused on energy conservation initiatives to reduce national electricity consumption. Programs such as the Sri Lanka Energy Efficiency Programme encourage industries and households to adopt energy-efficient appliances, with the government offering incentives for the purchase of low-energy lighting, air conditioning systems, and green building materials (Karunarathna et al., 2023). Green building standards have also been introduced to promote sustainable construction practices. These efforts have resulted in a national energy consumption reduction of approximately 15%. However, widespread adoption remains a challenge, as many consumers are still hesitant due to the higher initial cost of energy-efficient products (GBCSL, 2022).

In addition to direct interventions, the government is exploring fiscal policies for sustainable recovery and green transformation. Carbon pricing mechanisms, tax incentives, and green bonds have been introduced to encourage sustainable investments (Abeysekera, 2024). Furthermore, Abeysekera (2024), explains that, green bonds have raised over $50 million in 2021 to finance renewable energy and environmental protection projects. Carbon pricing, through taxes or cap-and-trade systems, is also being considered to reduce emissions while generating revenue for green initiatives (Herath and Jung, 2021). These fiscal measures help create financial incentives for businesses to shift towards sustainable operations, but their success will depend on effective implementation and the government's commitment to reinvesting funds in meaningful environmental projects (Abeysekera, 2024). To further accelerate the transition to sustainability, the government has actively promoted renewable energy adoption through financial incentives, including subsidies and low-interest loans for solar, wind, and hydropower projects (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2024). Net Metering and Net

Accounting schemes have encouraged more than 1.5 million households to install solar panels, reducing dependence on fossil fuels (Alagna, 2022). Furthermore, the author explains, while these initiatives have been successful, the affordability of renewable energy systems remains a challenge, particularly for low-income households.

To complement these efforts, as per Velnampy and Achchuthan (2016), green subsidies have been introduced to promote environmentally friendly technologies. These include tax reductions and subsidies for electric vehicles, as well as financial support for sustainable agriculture practices such as organic farming. The EV market has seen growth, with over 2,000 electric vehicles registered in 2023, reflecting a shift towards cleaner transportation (Bandaranayake, 2024). Similarly, subsidies for organic farming aim to reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, fostering sustainable agricultural practices (Thewarapperuma and Premarathne, 2023). According Thewarapperuma and Premarathne (2023), while these subsidies have made green alternatives more accessible, expanding them to benefit a larger portion of the population, particularly in rural areas, remains an ongoing challenge.

While Sri Lanka has introduced various policies aimed at promoting green consumption, the effectiveness of these initiatives has often been compromised by inadequate enforcement and a lack of necessary infrastructure to support their implementation (Samarasinghe, 2015; Tan et al., 2016). A prime example of this is the government's ban on plastic bags in 2017, which was intended to reduce plastic waste and encourage more sustainable alternatives. However, the policy has faced significant challenges in enforcement, with plastic bags continuing to flood markets, streets, and even the environment, largely due to lax monitoring and inconsistent penalties for violations (Fernando et al., 2020). This disparity underscores the broader challenges of implementing national policy initiatives effectively across diverse regions with differing socio-economic conditions, making it an area for further development and targeted policy attention.

2.3.2 Influence of Corporate Green Marketing and Potential Greenwashing

In recent years, Sri Lanka has seen a notable shift towards corporate sustainability, with several prominent companies adopting green marketing strategies and promoting eco-friendly initiatives (Kadam, 2024). According to Kadam (2024), this growing trend is largely driven by increasing consumer awareness about environmental issues and the need for businesses to address climate change, resource depletion, and waste management.

Dilmah Tea, for example, has long been a champion of sustainability through initiatives like Dilmah Conservation, which focuses on preserving biodiversity and promoting eco-friendly tea farming practices. Their commitment to organic

farming, water conservation, and fair trade practices has garnered them recognition in both local and international markets (Dilmah Conservation, 2025). The company further emphasizes its sustainability by promoting its Dilmah Organic Tea and eco-friendly packaging, underscoring its position as a brand dedicated to green practices (Dilmah Tea, n.d. ; Dilmah Tea, 2024). Additionally, their luxury leaf tea bags are made from natural, compostable materials (Dilmah Conservation, 2019).

MAS Holdings is committed to environmental responsibility through its sustainable textile initiatives, integrating eco-friendly materials and processes into its apparel production. The company offers environmentally responsible product lines, including those made from organic cotton, which is grown without harmful pesticides, and recycled polyester, derived from post-consumer plastic waste to reduce landfill pollution (MAS Holdings, 2023). MAS also prioritizes sustainable manufacturing by implementing water-saving dyeing techniques, wastewater recycling, and renewable energy sources like solar and wind power to minimize its carbon footprint. Additionally, the company embraces a circular economy approach by exploring upcycling, biodegradable materials, and recycling programs (MAS Holdings, 2025). Brandix, another major player in Sri Lanka's apparel industry, has taken a similar approach with its Green Factory initiative. The company’s flagship green factory in Seeduwa, certified by LEED, is a testament to Brandix's commitment to sustainability (Brandix, 2019). Through the use of renewable energy, water-efficient technologies, and a focus on reducing textile waste, Brandix is not only addressing environmental concerns but also enhancing its brand image as a responsible corporate entity (Brandix, 2025).

However, the challenge of truly sustainable practices lies in maintaining transparency and consistency in environmental claims, particularly when large companies make sweeping promises that may be difficult to substantiate (Delmas and Burbano, 2011). This raises concerns about greenwashing; a term that refers to the practice of companies misleading consumers into believing that their products are more environmentally friendly than they actually are (Furlow, 2010). As green marketing becomes more prevalent, some companies may exaggerate or misrepresent the sustainability of their practices to capitalize on the growing demand for eco-friendly products. For example, some companies may highlight a single green initiative, such as using recycled packaging or sourcing sustainable ingredients, while downplaying other less sustainable practices in their production processes. This can mislead consumers into thinking that a brand is fully committed to environmental responsibility when, in reality, its efforts may be minimal or surface-level (Delmas and Burbano, 2011).

According to Bandara (2022), in Sri Lanka, the situation is particularly concerning, as numerous cosmetics brands claim to be the "greenest" or "most environmentally friendly," despite their products being packaged in plastic tubes

or bottles. Bandara (2022) further explains that, these companies often publish articles on their websites promoting environmental protection, yet fail to reflect these claims in their product packaging. This issue is further highlighted by the recognition of major polluters as sustainability leaders. For example, despite Nestlé being one of the world's largest plastic polluters, leaving waste in dozens of countries, Nestlé Sri Lanka recently received the “Best Corporate Citizen Sustainability Award 2023” from the CCC. This raises concerns about the credibility of such awards and the true commitment of corporations to environmental sustainability (La Via Campesina, 2024). This highlights the ongoing prevalence of greenwashing in Sri Lanka, which, although widely observed, has yet to be effectively addressed or regulated.

2.3.3 Media's Role in Shaping Green Consumption in Sri Lanka

Media plays a crucial and dynamic role in shaping green consumption behaviors. By raising awareness, providing information, promoting green products, and sparking public discourse, media is central to the country's shift toward more sustainable consumption practices (Romero-Delgado, 2023). News programs in Sri Lanka have emerged as a significant medium for disseminating environmental information and promoting green consumption behaviors. According to the Consumer Awareness Survey on Sustainable Consumption conducted in 2018, news programs were identified as the most influential source of environmental awareness, with a mean influence value of 3.32 out of 5 (One Planet Network, 2018). This highlights the critical role of media in shaping public understanding of sustainability issues.

Prominent television channels such as Derana and Sirasa TV have actively contributed to this effort by featuring segments and campaigns focused on environmental conservation, climate change, and sustainable practices. For instance, TV Derana launched initiatives like the "Magen Gasak Mavu Deranata" ("A Tree for Mother Earth from Me") campaign, which aimed to plant one million trees across the country. This initiative earned TV Derana the prestigious Presidential Environmental Award in 2019, recognizing its contribution to environmental management and awareness (Ada Derana, 2019). Similarly, Sirasa TV has hosted programs such as "Sri Lanka 2048," which features debates on climate change and sustainable development, fostering public discourse on green solutions (Gunawardene, n.d.). These programs educate viewers on the importance of adopting eco-friendly behaviors, such as reducing plastic waste, conserving energy, and supporting renewable energy initiatives. For example, Parisara Sirisara, a program aired on YouTube and other platforms, discusses climate change impacts and mitigation strategies, further reinforcing the need for sustainable practices (Husma LK, 2023).

Although media raises awareness about environmental issues, its direct influence on green purchase intentions remains limited in Sri Lanka. A study by Velnampy and Achchuthan (2016) analyzed the relationship between media influence and consumer behavior and found that media exposure did not significantly affect consumers' willingness to purchase green products. This suggests that while consumers may be informed about sustainability through media channels, other factors—such as price sensitivity and lack of trust in green products—play a more significant role in shaping their purchasing decisions.

A study by Inparaj and Withanaarachchi (2024) reveals that, in recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have emerged as powerful tools for promoting green consumption among Sri Lankan consumers and the marketers increasingly use these platforms to run targeted campaigns that emphasize eco-friendly lifestyles and products. For instance, Eco Ceylon products leverages platforms like Facebook and Instagram to advertise biodegradable packaging and bamboo-based products (Eco Ceylon Think Green, 2025). These campaigns highlight the environmental benefits of their products, appealing to environmentally conscious consumers.

Furthermore, a research by Sooriyaarachchi (2024) highlights that social media advertising has a positive impact on consumer knowledge about sustainable products within Colombo's urban population. These campaigns are particularly effective among younger audiences who are more receptive to sustainability messaging. Sri Lanka has a significant social media user base, with platforms like Facebook having over 7 million users as of early 2022 (DataReportal, 2022). This widespread adoption makes social media an ideal medium for environmental campaigns. A study by Boyagoda and Sammani (2023) highlights how Facebook is used to share environmental content such as news, videos, and infographics. In the study, the authors have identified that undergraduates in Sri Lanka actively engage with environmental information on Facebook, joining groups dedicated to topics like climate change and deforestation. Moreover, Boyagoda and Sammani (2023) highlights that, while this engagement raises awareness, the study notes that it does not always translate into pro-environmental behaviors, indicating a gap between knowledge and action.

2.4 Governance and Regulatory Aspects of Green Consumption

2.4.1 Eco Labelling in Sri Lanka

Eco labelling in Sri Lanka represents a critical junction between environmental governance, market mechanisms, and consumer behavior. As a developing nation with significant ecological resources and biodiversity, Sri Lanka has increasingly embraced various eco labelling schemes as tools for promoting sustainable

production and consumption patterns (Jayasinghe-Mudalige et al., 2012). This analysis examines Sri Lanka's eco labelling landscape through a comprehensive investigation of regulatory frameworks, implementing authorities, consumer perceptions, and market applications, providing valuable context for research on green consumption through the theoretical lens of green governmentality.

2.4.2 Regulatory Framework and Policies

Sri Lanka's eco labelling policy framework has evolved gradually, influenced by both international commitments and domestic environmental priorities. The National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980, later amended in 1988 and 2000, provides the foundational legal architecture for environmental management in the country, though it did not initially address eco labelling specifically (Huong, 2016). The formalization of eco labelling emerged more prominently through the National Cleaner Production Policy adopted in 2005, which explicitly recognized environmental certification as a market-based instrument for promoting sustainable production practices (Kazmierczyk et al., 2022).

A significant milestone occurred in 2011 when the SLSI introduced the NGLS, establishing the country's first standardized approach to environmental product certification (Ministry of Environment, n.d). This scheme was designed to align with international standards such as ISO 14024 for Type I environmental labelling, reflecting Sri Lanka's efforts to harmonize domestic practices with global frameworks (Senaweera and Parasnis, 2021).

The CAA Act No. 9 of 2003 provides additional regulatory support by addressing misleading environmental claims and establishing penalties for greenwashing, though enforcement remains inconsistent (Indraratna, 2004). More recently, the National Policy on Sustainable Consumption and Production (2019-2030) has strengthened the policy architecture by explicitly incorporating eco labelling as a strategic instrument for market transformation (Ministry of Environment, 2019).

2.4.3 Key Authorities and Implementation Bodies

The institutional architecture for eco labelling in Sri Lanka involves multiple stakeholders with varying degrees of authority and responsibility. According to Wijayadasa and Ailapperuma (2014), The CEA, established under the National Environmental Act, serves as the primary regulatory body overseeing environmental standards and provides technical guidance for various certification schemes. However, Wijayadasa and Ailapperuma (2014), further explain that, the SLSI functions as the principal certification body, responsible for developing standards, conducting assessments, and awarding the National Green Label to qualifying products. As explained by Van Berkel (2011). the implementation landscape also includes the NCPC, established in 2002 as a joint initiative

between the UNIDO and the Ministry of Environment. The NCPC provides technical support to enterprises seeking environmental certification, including eco labels, and has been instrumental in building capacity among local producers (Van Berkel, 2011).

In Sri Lanka, industry-specific certification schemes are managed by specialized bodies. For instance, as explained by Munasinghe et al. (2021), the Sri Lanka Tea Board administers environmental certifications for the tea sector, while the EDB promotes eco labelling among export-oriented industries as a strategy for accessing premium international markets (ESCAP, 1996). The FSC and MSC certifications are also facilitated through their authorized certification bodies operating in Sri Lanka, primarily serving export-oriented timber and fishery products respectively (Grote and Stamm, 2007). Collectively, these entities constitute a multifaceted governance framework that facilitates the development, dissemination, and enforcement of eco-labelling initiatives across diverse industrial sectors in Sri Lanka.

2.5 Market Applications and Case Studies in Sri Lanka

The tea industry represents Sri Lanka's most advanced application of eco labelling (Munasinghe et al., 2021). Dilmah Tea pioneered environmental certification in this sector, obtaining Rainforest Alliance certification for several of its estates beginning in 2010 (Gunarathne, 2019). By 2023, approximately 40% of Sri Lanka's tea exports carried some form of environmental certification, including Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified, or organic certification (Sri Lanka Tea Board, 2015). These certifications have enabled Sri Lankan tea to maintain premium positioning in environmentally conscious markets such as Germany and the United Kingdom, where certified products command price premiums of 15-20% (Suranjan Priyanath et al., 2018).

The coconut industry has also embraced eco labelling, with companies like Coconut Development Authority and Serendipol obtaining organic certification for coconut-based products (Serendipol, n.d.). Serendipol, Sri Lanka's largest organic coconut oil producer, supplies global brands like Dr. Bronner's and has leveraged its organic certification to access premium markets in North America and Europe (Vidanapathirana and Wijesooriya, 2014).

The apparel sector, Sri Lanka's largest export industry, has increasingly adopted eco labelling as a competitive strategy. For an example, MAS Holdings, the country's largest apparel manufacturer, has implemented LEED certification for its manufacturing facilities and obtained GOTS certification for organic cotton products (De Fonseka, 2023).

The tourism sector increasingly adopts eco-labeling as a strategic mechanism to differentiate services and appeal to environmentally conscious consumers. In the Sri Lankan context, both large-scale hotel chains and smaller boutique

establishments have pursued internationally recognized certifications, such as Travelife Gold certification and the EU Ecolabel, as part of broader environmental management strategies. These certifications not only signal environmental commitment but also function as market tools that allow access to premium segments, particularly within eco-conscious European markets (Fernando and Kaluarachchi, 2016; Wadippuli Arachchi, 2024).

The GREENSL Labelling System, introduced by the GBCSL in 2012, serves as a certification framework aimed at promoting the adoption of environmentally sustainable building materials in Sri Lanka (Senaweera and Parasnis, 2021). Since its implementation, major producers in the construction sector have increasingly aligned with green certification standards, emphasizing reductions in carbon emissions and the integration of recycled content. This trend reflects the broader institutionalization of green building practices in Sri Lanka, as industry actors respond to evolving environmental and regulatory expectations (GBCSL, 2022; Tokyo Cement, 2024; Holcim, 2020).

As mentioned above, the diverse applications of eco labelling across Sri Lanka's tea, coconut, apparel, tourism, and construction industries demonstrate the country's growing commitment to environmental sustainability as both a competitive advantage and a response to global market demands.

2.6 Theoretical Frameworks and Relevance

The comprehensive examination of green consumption in Sri Lanka reveals a complex landscape where market-driven sustainability initiatives intersect with deep-seated structural inequalities and governance mechanisms. According to Wang (2015), “Green Governmentality” is derived from Foucauldian governmentality theory, which explores how governance operates not just through formal laws and regulations but also through discursive, institutional, and self-regulatory mechanisms. Through the lens of Green Governmentality, the evidence presented throughout this literature review demonstrates how environmental responsibility has become increasingly individualized, with consumers positioned as primary agents of change while systemic factors remain largely unaddressed. This is particularly evident in Sri Lanka's policy landscape, where initiatives such as the National Policy on Sustainable Consumption and Production (2019) and various green subsidies exemplify how the state employs discursive and institutional mechanisms to shape consumer behavior toward sustainability goals. The urban-rural divide in green consumption access, the premium pricing of eco-friendly products, and the selective enforcement of environmental regulations—such as the plastic bag ban—illustrate how green governmentality operates through seemingly neutral market mechanisms that actually reinforce existing socio-economic hierarchies (Fernando et al., 2020). Corporate green marketing strategies by companies like Dilmah, MAS Holdings, and Brandix further

demonstrate how sustainability discourses are deployed to create new forms of environmental citizenship, where consumers are expected to exercise their ecological responsibility through purchasing decisions rather than demanding structural corporate accountability (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2021).

Simultaneously, the pervasive influence of Responsibilization Theory becomes apparent in how environmental burdens are systematically shifted from institutional actors to individual consumers, despite the clear evidence of structural constraints that limit genuine choice. Responsibilization theory is rooted in neoliberal governance, where individuals are expected to self-regulate and make choices that align with broader policy objectives, even when those choices are constrained by systemic inequalities (Bankel and Solér, 2025). Responsibilization critiques the tendency of modern governance to frame social problems as matters of personal responsibility, thereby deflecting attention from institutional and corporate accountability (Mustalahti and Agrawal, 2020). The literature reveals that while media campaigns and corporate sustainability initiatives promote consumer-driven environmentalism, the actual capacity for meaningful green consumption remains severely constrained by economic disparities, infrastructure limitations, and the prevalence of greenwashing practices (Boyagoda, 2017). Rural communities, despite engaging in inherently sustainable practices through traditional ecological knowledge, are largely excluded from formal green consumption narratives that privilege market-based solutions accessible primarily to urban, middle-class consumers (Harris, 2003). The disconnect between policy intentions and implementation effectiveness—exemplified by the continued prevalence of plastic bags despite regulatory bans, and the recognition of major polluters like Nestlé as sustainability champions—underscores how responsibilization mechanisms deflect attention from institutional failures while imposing moral obligations on consumers who lack the structural support to fulfill them (Furlow, 2010). This theoretical framework thus illuminates how green consumption in Sri Lanka operates not merely as a consumer choice, but as a complex governance strategy that reproduces existing power relations while presenting sustainability as an individual responsibility, thereby obscuring the need for systemic transformation in production patterns, corporate accountability, and equitable access to sustainable alternatives.

2.7 The Limits of Green Consumption: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Sustainability Beyond Consumption

Sustainability basically means keeping the environment, society, and economy healthy so that people today can live well without making it harder for future

generations to do the same (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010). But even though this sounds simple, it raises questions—like what exactly are 'needs,' whose needs matter most, and how we decide between different wants and priorities (Engelman, 2013). Green consumption—buying things with the environment in mind—is one way people try to support sustainability. But it's not just about buying eco-friendly products. It also involves values, habits, and how people see themselves as environmentally responsible (Peattie, 2010). Still, this way of thinking often focuses too much on what individuals can buy, instead of looking at the bigger changes needed to truly protect the environment. It can also leave out people who can't afford or access 'green' products, creating new types of unfairness.

Today's sustainability problems are very difficult and can't be solved just by people making better shopping choices. Issues like climate change, loss of wildlife, and running out of natural resources are called 'wicked problems' by experts because they are very complicated, involve many people, and include different opinions and goals (Balint, 2011). In countries like Sri Lanka, these global problems mix with local issues like poverty, inequality, and the need for development (Athukorala and Karunarathna, 2018). This creates what Sachs (2015) calls the 'sustainability paradox'—the struggle between meeting people's needs now and protecting the environment for the future. Also, because products are made and used all over the world, the environmental damage often happens far away or later on. This makes it hard for people to see how their choices really affect the planet (Sachs, 2015). These big problems show that we can't rely only on consumer choices or awareness to fix things. We need to look more deeply at how sustainability is understood, debated, and put into action in different places and situations.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Approach and Justification

This study employs a qualitative case study design as it provides a context-specific, in-depth exploration of how green governmentality and responsibilization intersect in shaping consumer behavior within Sri Lanka's socio-economic and political landscape. Sustainability governance does not operate in isolation; rather, it is embedded within specific institutional frameworks, corporate strategies, media narratives, and consumer practices (Evans et al., 2017). A case study approach enables a situated analysis that moves beyond broad generalizations to uncover the intricate ways in which government policies, corporate sustainability discourses, and socio-cultural factors shape consumer perceptions and actions.

Green governmentality functions through multiple governance mechanisms, including state-led sustainability initiatives, corporate green marketing, media discourse, and informal sustainability practices (Scoones, 2016). A case study approach allows for an empirical examination of how these mechanisms interact within Sri Lanka's unique urban-rural divide, where sustainability is framed and practiced differently depending on economic realities, historical consumption patterns, and exposure to global environmental narratives. By focusing on this national context, the study critically engages with how sustainability is promoted, resisted, or adapted within a Global South framework, where structural inequalities and governance challenges play a significant role in shaping green consumerism (Bhar, 2023).

Additionally, this approach is particularly suited for interrogating the intersections of structure and agency, a fundamental concern in sustainability governance research (Correa-Ruiz, 2019). Consumers are not passive recipients of green governmentality; rather, they navigate sustainability imperatives through processes of negotiation, resistance, and compliance, shaped by their material conditions, socio-cultural values, and political-economic positioning (Soneryd and Uggla, 2015). A case study framework enables a deeper investigation of these dynamics, allowing for a critical analysis of consumer agency within broader structures of governance and market forces.

The qualitative nature of this case study further strengthens its ability to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of consumers, moving beyond mere statistical representation. By employing methods such as in-depth interviews, discourse analysis, and observational research, this study unpacks how green governmentality materializes in consumer decision-making and everyday sustainability practices. This is particularly important in Sri Lanka, where economic constraints, accessibility challenges, and trust in corporate and

governmental sustainability efforts play a crucial role in shaping sustainable consumption (Perez Cuso et al., 2024). Thus, the case study approach ensures that the research remains empirically grounded, critically engaged, and contextually relevant, offering meaningful contributions to the discourse on sustainability governance in the Global South.

3.2 Target Group and Sampling Strategy

This study focused on consumers aged 25 to 60, encompassing a broad spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, employment types, and geographical locations, including both urban and rural areas. The rationale for selecting this age group was grounded in their active role as primary decision-makers in household consumption. Individuals within this demographic bracket were more likely to engage with government sustainability policies, corporate green marketing strategies, and broader environmental initiatives, making them a critical group for examining how green governmentality and responsibilization influenced consumer behavior (Sun et al., 2019). Empirical data from the Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics (2023) further supported this selection, indicating that the highest labour force participation was concentrated within this age range, thereby reinforcing their economic agency in shaping household consumption patterns.

Rather than categorizing participants according to income, education level, or gender, this study intentionally refrained from imposing such demographic filters. This decision was grounded in the recognition that engagement with sustainability is not confined to any singular socio-economic group, but is instead shaped by a dynamic interplay of cultural, structural, and economic conditions. By avoiding restrictive pre-selection criteria, the research aimed to capture a more nuanced and inclusive range of perspectives on how sustainability is interpreted and practiced across diverse consumer identities.

Participant recruitment was carried out through a purposive snowball sampling strategy. Initial participants were identified via local networks, civil society organizations, and sustainability-related community initiatives operating within the selected urban and rural districts. These participants subsequently referred others within the target age cohort (25 to 60 years) who were similarly positioned to offer insights into sustainable consumption practices and perceptions of environmental responsibility. By employing this method, the study was able to capture both mainstream and marginal voices, ensuring that the analysis was informed by a range of lived realities.

To ensure a balanced and comparative analysis, the study included participants from five urban districts (Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, and Galle) and five rural districts (Monaragala, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and

Mullaitivu). The selection of these locations was strategic, capturing both economically vibrant, highly industrialized urban centres and rural regions where access to sustainable products and green initiatives may have been limited or shaped by different socio-political realities. According to Sivapalan (2021), the urban districts represented areas with high exposure to corporate sustainability campaigns, media influence, and government environmental policies, whereas the rural districts provided insights into how green consumerism was interpreted, resisted, or adapted in contexts where economic constraints, infrastructural disparities, and localized sustainability practices played a significant role.

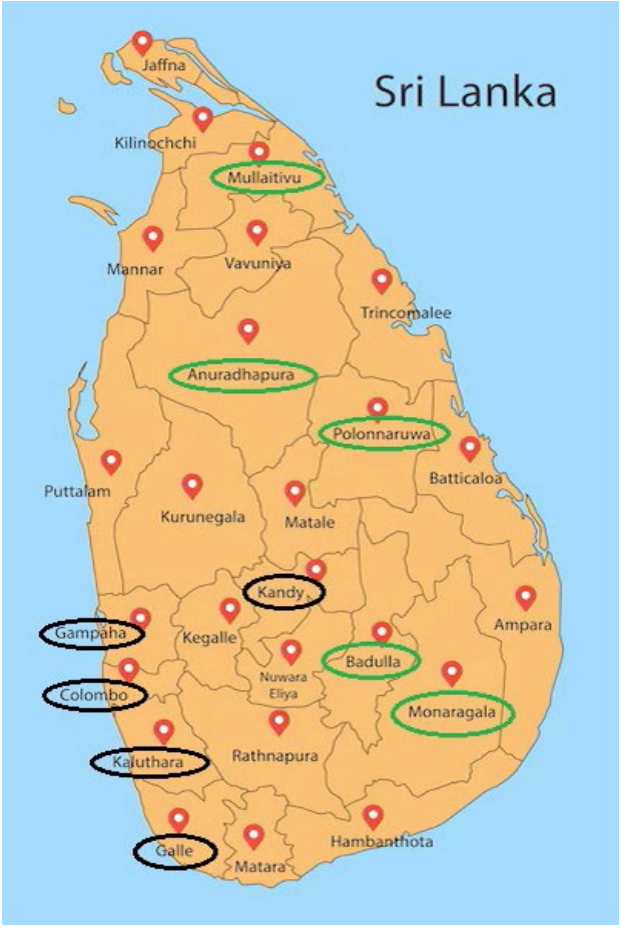

Figure 1 Map of Sri Lanka showing selected urban areas (circled in black) and rural areas (circled in green) which spreads over the country. . (Source: Freepik, District Map of Sri Lanka, https://www.freepik.com/premium-vector/district-map-sri-lanka-district-map-sri-lanka-drawing-by-illustration_58433134.htm [accessed 2024-04-06], modified by Author, 2025)

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share their perspectives while maintaining a structured focus on

key research themes. The flexibility of this method ensured that participants could elaborate on their experiences, leading to richer data. To recruit participants, as mentioned in 3.3 section, a purposive snowball sampling approach was employed, enabling the identification of individuals with relevant experiences through referrals from initial respondents. This method facilitated access to a diverse pool of participants, particularly those in rural areas who might have been otherwise difficult to reach (Parker et al., 2019). Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and the WhatsApp mobile application, in both English and Sinhala, depending on the participant's familiarity with English. For rural participants, Sinhala was the predominant language to ensure that they could express themselves comfortably and accurately.

The decision to conduct interviews remotely via Zoom and WhatsApp, rather than face-to-face, introduced both methodological advantages and limitations that warrant acknowledgment. While remote interviews en abled access to geographically dispersed participants, particularly those in rural areas who would have been challenging to reach in person, this approach may have affected the depth of rapport-building and non-verbal communication typically available in face-to-face interactions. The absence of physical presence could have limited the researcher's ability to observe contextual cues and body language, potentially reducing the richness of data interpretation. Furthermore, the reliance on digital platforms may have inadvertently excluded the most socially or geographically isolated populations, particularly individuals with limited digital access or unstable internet connectivity, potentially underrepresenting their perspectives in the study. However, conducting interviews through familiar platforms like WhatsApp may have created a more comfortable environment for some participants, particularly those less familiar with formal interview settings, potentially encouraging more candid responses. Additionally, the flexibility to conduct interviews in participants' preferred locations may have reduced power dynamics inherent in researcher-controlled environments, while the recorded nature of digital platforms ensured accurate data capture and transcription.

3.4 Analytical Framework

To ensure a structured and theoretically informed analysis, thematic analysis was employed as the analytical framework to systematically organize and interpret interview data. Following Braun et al.'s (2019) six-phase approach, this method provided a rigorous yet flexible framework that facilitated the identification of key themes emerging from participant narratives. Interviews conducted in Sinhala were transcribed and subsequently translated into English to ensure consistency in analysis, while interviews conducted in English were directly transcribed. All transcribed interviews were then utilized in the thematic analysis, allowing for an in-depth examination of patterns, meanings, and discourses related to consumer

awareness and perceptions of green consumption. This approach ensured that linguistic differences did not create analytical disparities and that the data remained reflective of participants' authentic perspectives.

By integrating both inductive and deductive coding strategies as explained by Azungah (2018), the study captured not only the lived experiences of consumers but also the broader discursive and structural dynamics shaping green consumption. Thematic coding was directly guided by the research questions and interview responses, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how sustainability discourses are constructed, contested, and negotiated across urban and rural contexts.

Table 1 Thematic framework for analyzing consumer awareness and perception of green consumption in Sri Lanka

Theme	**Sub-Themes**	**Description**
Conceptualizations of Green Consumption	Awareness and Knowledge	Participants' understanding of sustainability concepts, including 'green consumption,' 'eco-friendly products,' and 'carbon footprint.'
	Sources of Knowledge	The influence of media, corporate campaigns, government policies, and social networks in shaping awareness.
	Perceived Importance of Green Consumption	How participants evaluate the necessity of adopting sustainable practices in their daily lives.
Influence of Governance and Market Mechanisms on Consumer Attitudes	Role of Government Policies	Perceptions of the effectiveness of sustainability-related regulations, incentives, and eco-labeling schemes.
	Corporate Influence and Green Marketing	Trust in corporate sustainability efforts, skepticism toward greenwashing, and responsiveness to corporate sustainability campaigns.
	Media and Public Discourse	The impact of advertisements, news, and social media in shaping green consciousness.
Consumer Agency and Responsibilization	Perceived Consumer Responsibility	The extent to which participants feel individually accountable for environmental sustainability.

	Negotiation, Compliance, and Resistance	How participants accept, contest, or reject sustainability discourses imposed by governance structures.
	Pressure and Social Expectations	Experiences of being pressured into sustainable choices by societal norms, workplace policies, or peer influence.
Barriers and Enablers of Green Consumption	Economic Constraints	The affordability and accessibility of eco-friendly products, and how financial limitations affect sustainable choices.
	Cultural and Lifestyle Influences	The role of traditional practices, habits, and convenience in shaping sustainable consumption behaviors.
	Trust and Perceptions of Green Products	Concerns about greenwashing, credibility of eco-labels, and the need for clearer sustainability information.
	Motivational Drivers for Sustainable Choices	Factors that positively influence and encourage green consumption behaviors, including environmental concern, health considerations, economic benefits, social influence, identity construction, and intergenerational responsibility.
Urban-Rural Differences in Green Consumption	Exposure to Sustainability Discourses	Differences in awareness and engagement between urban and rural populations.
	Informal vs. Formal Sustainability Practices	Rural ecological practices that exist outside mainstream sustainability governance frameworks.
	Accessibility and Infrastructure Challenges	How urban and rural disparities affect the adoption of sustainable lifestyles.
Effectiveness of Existing Sustainability Policies and Initiatives	Policy Awareness and Engagement	The extent to which participants are aware of and interact with government sustainability initiatives.
	Inclusivity and Socioeconomic Barriers	Whether green governance policies are perceived as accessible to all socio-economic groups.

	Suggestions for Policy Improvement	Participants' recommendations for enhancing sustainability policies and consumer engagement strategies.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the qualitative nature of this study, ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the research process. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, their rights, and the manner in which their data would be used. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary. Prior to conducting the interviews, explicit permission was sought from each participant to record the conversation, allowing them to make an informed decision regarding their comfort with audio documentation. To maintain confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms were used, and all data was securely stored, preventing any unauthorized access or potential identification of participants.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

This research examined consumer awareness and perception of green consumption in Sri Lanka through the lens of green governmentality and responsibilization. Through interviews with participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds across five urban districts (Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, and Galle) and five rural districts (Monaragala, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Mullaitivu), the study revealed complex dynamics in how Sri Lankan consumers navigate sustainability discourses and practices. The findings below highlight the multifaceted nature of green consumption in Sri Lanka, addressing the study's four primary research objectives and questions.

4.1.1 Diverse Conceptualizations of Green Consumption

The study uncovered significant variation in how Sri Lankan consumers understand and practice green consumption, with notable differences across geographic, socioeconomic, and generational lines. Urban participants, particularly those with higher education and income levels, demonstrated familiarity with global sustainability terminology and market-based approaches to environmental responsibility. As a corporate professional from Colombo explained:

> "Green consumption means making conscious choices that minimize environmental harm—buying products with eco-certification, reducing plastic use, and supporting companies with genuine sustainability commitments. I see it as an ethical responsibility that guides my purchasing decisions." (Participant 3, Colombo, 32)

This market-oriented conceptualization contrasts sharply with rural perspectives, where sustainability practices were integrated into daily life without being labeled as "green consumption." A farmer from Anuradhapura observed:

> "What city people call 'green living' is simply how we've always survived. We conserve water during droughts, use natural fertilizers from our livestock, and share seeds among families. These aren't special eco-friendly choices—they're essential practices passed down through generations." (Participant 22, Anuradhapura, 58)

The research also revealed generational differences in how sustainability is conceptualized, with younger participants (25-40) more likely to frame green consumption through global environmental narratives, while older participants (41-60) often described sustainability in terms of resource conservation and traditional values. A middle-aged teacher from Galle reflected:

> "When I was growing up, we practiced what you now call sustainability out of necessity and respect for resources. We didn't have a name for it—it was about not wasting what you have. Today's generation learns about it through fancy terms and brands, but the essence should be the same." (Participant 15, Galle, 47)

These diverse conceptualizations reflect the uneven penetration of green governmentality across Sri Lanka's socio-cultural landscape. While urban consumers increasingly adopt globalized sustainability narratives promoted through media and corporate marketing, rural and older populations engage with environmental responsibility through cultural frameworks that predate formal green governance mechanisms.

4.1.2 Media Influence and Information Asymmetry

The research identified significant disparities in how consumers access environmental information, with urban participants citing diverse information sources while rural participants reported limited exposure to formal sustainability discourses. A marketing professional from Colombo described:

> "Environmental information is everywhere in the city—corporate CSR campaigns, government announcements, international news, social media influencers promoting sustainable lifestyles. Sometimes it feels overwhelming to process all these different environmental messages." (Participant 7, Colombo, 34)

This information abundance contrasts with rural participants' experiences, as a shopkeeper from Mullaitivu explained:

> "We rarely see environmental campaigns here. Television occasionally shows government announcements about plastic bans or conservation, but we don't get the detailed information that seems available in cities. Most environmental knowledge here comes from community elders or radio programs." (Participant 30, Mullaitivu, 45)

Interestingly, the study revealed that information abundance did not necessarily translate to greater environmental engagement. Some urban participants expressed information fatigue and skepticism toward the deluge of sustainability messaging. A bank employee from Gampaha noted:

> "There's so much environmental messaging that it becomes noise—every brand claims to be 'green' or 'eco-friendly' now. It's exhausting to sort through what's genuine and what's marketing gimmick, so sometimes I just tune it all out." (Participant 9, Gampaha, 29)

This finding aligns with Sharma et al.'s (2024) research on eco-anxiety and information overload in sustainability communication, suggesting that excessive environmental messaging without clear action pathways can lead to disengagement rather than motivation.

4.1.3 Trust Deficits and Credibility Challenges

A striking pattern across participants was widespread skepticism toward institutional environmental claims, with consumers expressing distrust of both corporate and governmental sustainability initiatives. This trust deficit was particularly pronounced among urban, educated participants who described sophisticated techniques for evaluating environmental claims. A university lecturer from Kandy stated:

> "I've become very skeptical of corporate environmental claims. I look beyond the marketing to check if a company has third-party certification, transparent supply chains, and consistent sustainability practices across all operations—not just for their 'green' product line." (Participant 13, Kandy, 40)

Rural participants expressed similar skepticism, though often based on direct observations of implementation failures rather than abstract concerns about greenwashing. A small business owner from Badulla remarked:

> "The government announced tree planting programs in our district, but we never saw proper follow-through. Saplings were distributed, photos were taken, but there was no monitoring or maintenance. It feels like these programs are for publicity, not actual environmental improvement." (Participant 21, Badulla, 53)

This pervasive trust deficit creates significant challenges for green governmentality mechanisms that rely on consumer faith in institutional environmental leadership. When consumers doubt the authenticity of sustainability initiatives, they may reject their assigned role as responsible environmental actors or adopt more selective engagement strategies, as a government employee from Kalutara described:

> "I've become very selective about which environmental initiatives I support. I trust local environmental NGOs and community-led conservation efforts but am wary of corporate sustainability campaigns and government announcements without clear implementation plans." (Participant 11, Kalutara, 34)

4.1.4 The Complexity of Individual Responsibility

The research revealed nuanced perspectives on environmental responsibility, with consumers simultaneously acknowledging personal obligations while questioning the disproportionate burden placed on individuals. This complex positioning toward responsibilization manifested differently across demographic groups.

Urban professionals often expressed willingness to assume environmental responsibility while recognizing its structural limitations. A corporate manager from Colombo reflected:

> "I accept that my consumption choices matter for the environment, and I try to make better decisions when I can afford to. But I also recognize that my individual actions are a drop in the ocean compared to industrial pollution or policy failures. It sometimes feels like consumer responsibility is emphasized to deflect attention from corporate and government accountability." (Participant 6, Colombo, 43)

Middle-income participants frequently described a sense of conflicted responsibility, where environmental awareness collided with economic constraints. A teacher from Gampaha explained:

> "I feel guilty when I can't afford eco-friendly options, like I'm failing some moral test. But then I think—why should environmental protection be a luxury that only wealthy people can afford? Shouldn't sustainable options be the standard and accessible to everyone?" (Participant 8, Gampaha, 36)

Rural participants often challenged the urban-centric notion of environmental responsibility, highlighting how their traditional practices already embodied sustainability principles without explicit environmental labeling. A farmer from Polonnaruwa asserted:

> "City people talk about 'becoming green' as if it's a new idea, but rural communities have always lived close to the land, taking only what we need. We didn't need government campaigns or fancy labels to teach us about living sustainably—it's part of our cultural heritage." (Participant 27, Polonnaruwa, 55)

These diverse perspectives reveal how responsibilization operates unevenly across Sri Lanka's socioeconomic landscape, creating moral pressures that are experienced differently depending on one's economic position, geographical location, and cultural context.

4.1.5 Economic Constraints and the Class Dimension of Green Consumption

Economic barriers emerged as the most significant obstacle to green consumption, with participants across all regions citing the higher cost of sustainable products as a major limitation. This economic constraint was particularly acute for middle and lower-income participants, as a retail worker from Kandy explained:

> "Organic vegetables cost nearly twice as much as regular ones. Eco-friendly cleaning products are a luxury when you're stretching your salary to cover basic needs. I understand the environment is important, but these sustainable choices seem designed for people with disposable income." (Participant 12, Kandy, 39)

Even higher-income participants acknowledged how economic constraints shaped their environmental choices, revealing the class dimensions of green consumption. A business owner from Galle reflected:

> "I can afford many sustainable options, but I'm conscious that this is a privilege. When organic food, electric vehicles, and solar panels are priced as premium products, we're essentially saying that environmental protection is for the wealthy. This undermines the entire premise of collective environmental responsibility." (Participant 14, Galle, 50)

Rural participants described different economic challenges, often related to infrastructure limitations rather than product pricing. A community leader from Monaragala observed:

> "Our village doesn't have proper waste management infrastructure, so even if people wanted to recycle, there's nowhere to take separated waste. The nearest recycling center is 30 kilometers away—who has the time or transportation to make that journey?" (Participant 18, Monaragala, 49)

These findings highlight how economic disparities fundamentally shape engagement with green consumption, creating a sustainability landscape where environmental participation is significantly influenced by class position and geographical location. This challenges the core premise of green governmentality, which assumes that environmental responsibility can be universally embraced regardless of socioeconomic context.

4.1.6 Urban-Rural Disparities in Sustainability Governance

The research revealed striking differences in how sustainability governance operates in urban versus rural contexts, with significant implications for consumer engagement. Urban areas demonstrated more visible institutional sustainability mechanisms, as a resident of Colombo described:

> "In the city, you see the formal sustainability apparatus everywhere—recycling bins in shopping malls, corporate sustainability campaigns, environmental regulations for businesses, green certification for products. The government and companies are actively promoting an environmental agenda, even if implementation is sometimes lacking." (Participant 4, Colombo, 31)

Rural participants described a governance landscape where formal sustainability mechanisms were largely absent or inconsistently implemented. A farmer from Mullaitivu explained:

> "Government environmental initiatives rarely reach our village in any meaningful way. Officials might visit once to announce a new policy, but there's no follow-up, no infrastructure development, no education on how to implement changes. We're essentially left to continue as we always have." (Participant 31, Mullaitivu, 52)

However, the research also uncovered a paradoxical phenomenon where the absence of formal green governance in rural areas coincided with more

environmentally sustainable practices. A community elder from Monaragala observed:

> "Without all the packaging and processing that happens in cities, our rural lifestyle naturally produces less waste. We grow food locally, cook from scratch, repair items rather than replacing them—not because of environmental rules but because it's economically sensible and part of our culture." (Participant 19, Monaragala, 60)

This urban-rural governance disparity creates a situation where formal sustainability initiatives are concentrated in urban areas—where consumption patterns are often more environmentally damaging—while rural areas with potentially more sustainable practices receive less institutional support and recognition. This imbalance reveals how green governmentality in Sri Lanka operates primarily through urban, market-oriented mechanisms rather than building upon existing sustainable practices in rural communities.

4.1.7 Effectiveness of Policy Instruments and Market Mechanisms

The study found varying perceptions regarding the effectiveness of specific governance mechanisms such as eco-labeling, sustainability incentives, and corporate green marketing. Across the sample, participants expressed mixed views on eco-labeling programs, with many questioning their credibility and accessibility. A professional from Colombo stated:

> "I look for certifications like organic labels or energy efficiency ratings, but I'm never entirely sure what standards they represent or how rigorously they're enforced. It feels like there are too many different labels with unclear requirements, making it difficult to make truly informed choices." (Participant 5, Colombo, 35)

Government sustainability incentives received particularly critical assessments, with participants citing implementation gaps and design flaws. A solar energy consumer from Gampaha explained:

> "The government's net metering scheme for solar power looked good on paper, but the application process was so bureaucratic and time-consuming that many people gave up. These green incentives need to be accessible and straightforward if they're going to drive real change." (Participant 10, Kalutara, 37)

Corporate sustainability marketing generated the most skepticism, with participants across demographic groups questioning the authenticity of corporate environmental claims. A consumer from Kalutara observed:

> "When a company known for excessive packaging suddenly champions a single 'eco-friendly' product line, it feels disingenuous. True corporate sustainability should

> transform the entire business model, not just create a green sideline for marketing purposes." (Participant 11, Kalutara, 34)

Interestingly, community-based environmental initiatives received more positive assessments than top-down governance mechanisms. A participant from Anuradhapura described:

> "The most effective environmental program in our area was a community-led watershed protection initiative. It worked because local people designed it based on actual needs, everyone participated in implementation, and we could see direct benefits to our water supply. Government programs often lack this connection to local realities." (Participant 24, Anuradhapura, 42)

These findings suggest that governance mechanisms in Sri Lanka frequently suffer from implementation gaps, credibility challenges, and disconnection from local contexts, limiting their effectiveness in promoting sustainable consumption.

4.1.8 Psychological Dimensions of Green Consumption

The research uncovered complex psychological factors that influence consumer engagement with sustainability, including peer influence, status considerations, and value alignments. Social pressure emerged as a significant factor, particularly among urban professionals, as a marketing executive from Colombo explained:

> "In my workplace and social circle, certain environmental behaviors have become status markers—bringing a reusable coffee cup, driving a hybrid car, or mentioning your home composting system. There's definitely social pressure to participate in these visible green practices." (Participant 2, Colombo, 33)

However, the study also revealed more intrinsic motivations, particularly among participants who connected environmental values with cultural or religious beliefs. A teacher from Kandy reflected:

> "My Buddhist principles teach respect for all living beings and mindfulness about consumption. Environmental protection aligns with these spiritual values—it's not just about following trends or government rules but honoring deeper principles about our relationship with nature." (Participant 13, Kandy, 40)

Psychological barriers to sustainability included habit inertia and convenience factors, which participants across demographic groups acknowledged. A working mother from Galle admitted:

> "Even though I care about the environment, convenience often wins when I'm juggling work and family responsibilities. Using disposable items or choosing whatever product is most accessible becomes the default when you're pressed for time, regardless of environmental concerns." (Participant 16, Galle, 38)

These psychological dimensions reveal how green governmentality operates not only through formal policies but through social norms, identity construction, and value systems. The effectiveness of sustainability governance depends significantly on how well it aligns with or modifies these psychological factors.

4.1.9 The Emergence of Consumer Agency and Resistance

Despite structural constraints, the research uncovered diverse forms of consumer agency, where participants actively negotiated, reinterpreted, or resisted sustainability governance. These ranged from selective engagement with environmental initiatives to the development of alternative sustainability practices outside mainstream frameworks.

Some urban consumers described strategic approaches to navigating corporate sustainability claims, developing personal criteria for evaluating environmental authenticity. A professional from Colombo explained:

> "I've developed my own system for assessing whether a company's green claims are genuine. I look at their entire product line, their packaging choices, whether they disclose their supply chain impacts, and if they support environmental policy reforms. I won't be manipulated by superficial green marketing." (Participant 1, Colombo, 36)

Middle-income participants often described creative adaptations that allowed environmental participation despite economic constraints. A government employee from Gampaha detailed:

> "I can't afford many commercially marketed eco-products, so I've developed my own alternatives—making cleaning solutions from vinegar and citrus peels, composting in a small apartment balcony garden, and participating in neighborhood clothing swap events. It's sustainability on my own terms." (Participant 9, Gampaha, 29)

Rural participants demonstrated perhaps the most profound form of resistance by maintaining traditional ecological practices that operated outside formal sustainability frameworks. A farmer from Polonnaruwa asserted:

> "We don't need fancy certification to tell us how to live sustainably. My family has practiced natural farming for generations—using companion planting to deter pests, saving heirloom seeds, and maintaining soil health through crop rotation. These methods worked long before 'organic' became a marketing term." (Participant 28, Polonnaruwa, 55)

These expressions of consumer agency challenge simplistic narratives about passive acceptance of environmental responsibility, revealing instead how individuals actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist their assigned roles within sustainability governance frameworks.

4.2 Thematic Analysis Based on Theories

This section employs the theoretical frameworks of green governmentality and responsibilization to analyze how sustainability governance mechanisms shape consumer behavior in Sri Lanka. By systematically examining the interview data through these critical lenses, we uncover the complex power relations and structural dynamics that influence green consumption practices across diverse socioeconomic and geographical contexts.

4.2.1 Conceptualizations of Green Consumption

Urban participants, particularly those with higher education and income levels, demonstrated familiarity with global sustainability terminology and articulated green consumption through market-based environmental frameworks:

> "Green consumption is about making conscious choices—looking for eco-labels, checking carbon footprints, and supporting companies with genuine environmental commitments. It's about using our purchasing power to create positive environmental change." (Participant 4, Colombo, 31)

This market-oriented understanding reflects how green governmentality in urban settings establishes certain forms of environmental knowledge as legitimate, creating what Rutherford (2017) terms "environmental subjects" who understand their ecological responsibility primarily through consumption choices.

In contrast, rural participants often described sustainability through practical, experience-based knowledge systems rather than formal environmental terminology:

> "We don't use these fancy terms here. What you call 'sustainable' is simply how we've lived for generations—using natural fertilizers from our cattle, collecting rainwater during monsoons, preserving seeds for next season, and wasting nothing. These practices come from necessity and respect for resources, not from environmental campaigns." (Participant 22, Anuradhapura, 58)

This finding challenges predominant green governmentality frameworks by revealing alternative ecological knowledge systems that exist outside formal sustainability discourses. As Wang (2015) argues, green governmentality often privileges scientific and market-based environmental knowledge while marginalizing traditional ecological practices. This knowledge hierarchy creates a situation where rural populations may practice sustainability without recognition within formal environmental governance frameworks.

When it comes to sources of knowledge, urban participants described multiple sources of environmental information, including corporate messaging, government campaigns, digital media, and international sustainability discourses:

> "Environmental information comes at us from everywhere in the city—corporate CSR campaigns on billboards, government announcements on television, international climate change news online, and even friends sharing eco-tips on Instagram. It's a constant stream of environmental messaging." (Participant 7, Colombo, 34)

This information abundance reflects concentrated green governmentality in urban spaces, where multiple institutional actors compete to shape environmental consciousness. Through the lens of Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez's (2020) analysis, this represents how green governmentality functions not through direct regulation but through discursive saturation that normalizes certain environmental understandings.

Rural participants reported more limited and localized sources of environmental knowledge:

> "We learn about environmental practices through community elders, agricultural extension officers, and occasionally radio programs. Government environmental campaigns rarely reach our village, and when they do, they often promote practices that aren't suitable for our local conditions." (Participant 27, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This disparity in knowledge circulation creates what Kandachar and Halme (2017) identify as "information asymmetry" in environmental governance, where certain populations have limited access to sustainability discourse despite potentially greater vulnerability to environmental challenges.

When it comes to perceived importance of green consumption: value negotiation and cultural context ,urban professionals often articulated sustainability as a moral imperative linked to global citizenship:

> "Environmental protection is essential for our collective future. As global citizens, we have a responsibility to minimize our impact and make choices that preserve resources for future generations. This is not optional—it's a necessity for planetary survival." (Participant 6, Colombo, 43)

This moral framing reflects what Soneryd and Uggla (2015) identify as a key mechanism of responsibilization, where environmental protection becomes a matter of personal ethics rather than collective political action. By framing sustainability as moral obligation, responsibilization effectively places the burden of environmental action on individual consumers rather than institutional actors.

Middle-income participants frequently described sustainability importance through practical cost-benefit calculations:

> "Green choices are important when they make practical sense. Energy-efficient appliances save money over time, and reducing waste is both environmentally responsible and economically sensible. But when eco-options cost significantly more, their importance has to be weighed against budget constraints." (Participant 12, Kandy, 39)

This pragmatic evaluation challenges simplistic responsibilization narratives by highlighting how economic realities influence environmental prioritization. As Bankel and Solér (2025) argue, responsibilization often ignores material constraints that limit consumer capacity to prioritize environmental considerations.

Rural participants frequently conceptualized environmental importance through local resource dependencies:

> "Protecting our natural environment isn't an abstract concept for us—it's directly connected to our survival. When the forest is healthy, our water sources are secure. When soil is maintained properly, our crops thrive. Environmental protection is woven into our understanding of community wellbeing." (Participant 31, Mullaitivu, 52)

This place-based understanding of environmental importance represents what Mustalahti and Agrawal (2020) describe as "contextual responsibility" that emerges from direct resource relationships rather than abstract environmental ethics. This finding challenges urban-centric green governmentality frameworks that fail to recognize diverse motivations for environmental engagement.

4.2.2 Influence of Governance and Market Mechanisms on Consumer Attitudes

Findings reveal complex relationships between policy mechanisms and consumer attitudes, characterized by awareness gaps, implementation challenges, and trust deficits.

Urban participants demonstrated greater awareness of formal environmental policies but expressed skepticism regarding their implementation:

> "Sri Lanka has impressive environmental policies on paper—plastic bans, waste segregation requirements, energy efficiency standards. But implementation is inconsistent at best and nonexistent at worst. This gap between policy rhetoric and reality makes it difficult to take government environmental leadership seriously." (Participant 5, Colombo, 35)

This implementation gap represents what Siyambalapitiya et al. (2018) identify as a critical weakness in environmental governance, where ambitious policy frameworks fail to translate into effective implementation due to capacity limitations, coordination failures, and competing priorities. This undermines the credibility of government leadership in sustainability governance.

Policy awareness exhibited stark geographical disparities, with rural participants reporting limited knowledge of environmental regulations:

> "We rarely hear about environmental policies until officials suddenly appear to enforce rules we didn't know existed. There's no education about new regulations or support for

> implementation—just expectations of compliance without the necessary information or resources." (Participant 18, Monaragala, 49)

This communication gap illustrates Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez's (2020) observation that green governmentality often assumes knowledge transmission while failing to establish adequate communication channels, particularly in peripheral regions. This creates uneven policy landscapes where certain populations are excluded from meaningful participation in environmental governance.

Most significantly, participants across demographic groups questioned whether government environmental policies adequately addressed structural barriers to sustainability:

> "Government sustainability initiatives seem designed for those already privileged enough to make green choices. They promote consumer solutions like buying eco-products or installing solar panels without addressing the fundamental affordability and accessibility issues that prevent most people from participating in these 'solutions.'" (Participant 11, Kalutara, 34)

This critique aligns with Wang's (2015) analysis that green governmentality often focuses on behavioral modification while neglecting structural inequalities that limit consumer capacity to engage with prescribed environmental behaviors. This approach creates sustainability frameworks that are inclusive in rhetoric but exclusive in practice.

Participants identified transparency and consistency as key factors influencing their trust in corporate environmental initiatives:

> "I trust companies that are transparent about both their environmental successes and challenges—not just those making sweeping sustainability claims. When a business acknowledges areas where they're still working to improve and provides verifiable evidence of progress, their environmental commitments seem more credible." (Participant 13, Kandy, 40)

This finding suggests that effective corporate participation in green governmentality requires what Deshmukh and Tare (2024) term "governance transparency"—providing accessible and comprehensive information about environmental practices rather than selective sustainability narratives. This transparency enables more informed consumer engagement with corporate environmental claims.

Media platforms emerged as significant governance mechanisms that shape how sustainability is conceptualized, prioritized, and normalized within public consciousness. Urban participants described how media coverage establishes certain environmental issues as priorities while marginalizing others:

> "Media coverage disproportionately focuses on visible environmental problems like plastic pollution and wildlife conservation while giving less attention to less photogenic but equally important issues like groundwater contamination or air quality. This selective attention shapes which environmental concerns are perceived as urgent." (Participant 1, Colombo, 36)

This reflects what Sharma et al. (2024) identify as "environmental agenda setting," where media platforms influence which sustainability issues receive public attention and policy response. Through green governmentality, this represents how discourse construction shapes environmental problem recognition and solution priorities.

Social media emerged as a particularly powerful channel for circulating environmental norms and expectations:

> "Environmental social norms spread rapidly through platforms like Instagram and Facebook, where 'green lifestyle' influencers showcase sustainability practices that quickly become expected behaviors. Suddenly everyone feels pressure to have a metal straw or reusable coffee cup because these visible green behaviors have been established as social standards." (Participant 2, Colombo, 33)

This norm circulation aligns with Lu's (2024) research on how digital platforms function as governance mechanisms by establishing and reinforcing environmental expectations. Through responsibilization theory, this represents how social pressure becomes a mechanism for transferring environmental responsibility to individuals through performative sustainability practices.

Rural participants noted both exclusion from and selective engagement with mainstream environmental media:

> "National media rarely represents rural environmental perspectives or challenges. When environmental programs discuss sustainable farming, they promote expensive 'modern' organic techniques rather than acknowledging traditional farming methods that have been sustainable for generations. This makes environmental discourse feel disconnected from rural realities." (Participant 28, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This observation supports Anantharaman's (2022) critique of how environmental discourse often marginalizes non-urban and non-Western sustainability perspectives. Through green governmentality, this represents how certain environmental knowledge systems are privileged while others are excluded from legitimate environmental discourse.

4.2.3 Consumer Agency and Responsibilization

When it comes to perceived consumer responsibility, many participants, particularly those with higher education and income levels, described internalizing some degree of environmental responsibility:

> "I believe we all have environmental responsibilities as individuals. While I recognize that my personal impact is small compared to industrial pollution, I still feel obligated to make the best choices I can within my circumstances. Environmental citizenship means accepting your part in collective action, even while advocating for system change." (Participant 6, Colombo, 43)

This internalization represents what Soneryd and Uggla (2015) identify as successful responsibilization, where individuals accept environmental obligations as part of their moral identity. Through green governmentality, this demonstrates how environmental norms become internalized as self-regulation rather than external obligation.

However, this acceptance was frequently accompanied by critical awareness of responsibility disproportionality:

> "There's something fundamentally unfair about how environmental responsibility is distributed. As consumers, we're constantly criticized for our choices while corporations causing far greater environmental damage face minimal accountability. This imbalance makes individual responsibility feel like a distraction from more impactful systemic changes." (Participant 3, Colombo, 32)

This critique aligns with Bankel and Solér's (2025) analysis of how responsibilization often functions to deflect attention from institutional environmental failures by focusing on individual behavior. Through green governmentality, this represents resistance to governance frameworks that privatize environmental responsibility while limiting institutional accountability.

Rural participants often challenged urban-centric notions of consumer responsibility:

> "The idea that we need to learn 'green consumption' is strange when you consider that rural communities have been practicing resource conservation, minimal waste, and sustainable harvesting for generations. Our traditional lifestyles already embody environmental responsibility without needing special products or campaigns." (Participant 24, Anuradhapura, 42)

This perspective supports Harris's (2003) argument that responsibilization narratives often ignore existing sustainable practices within traditional communities. Through green governmentality, this represents how alternative forms of environmental responsibility exist outside market-based consumption frameworks but remain marginalized within dominant sustainability narratives.

When it comes to negotiation, compliance, and resistance in strategic environmental engagement, strategic compliance emerged as a common response, where participants selectively engaged with environmental practices based on personal values, practical constraints, and perceived impact:

> "I've developed my own system for prioritizing which green practices are worth my limited resources. I consistently avoid single-use plastics and minimize food waste because these align with both my values and economic constraints. But I can't afford organic food or an electric vehicle, so I don't accept guilt about those choices given my financial reality." (Participant 8, Gampaha, 36)

This selective engagement represents what Yoon (2020) terms "strategic environmentalism," where consumers thoughtfully navigate competing demands rather than uncritically accepting all environmental responsibilities. Through green governmentality, this demonstrates how individuals exercise agency within governance frameworks rather than passively receiving environmental prescriptions.

Some participants described more active resistance to environmental responsibility narratives:

> "I've become increasingly skeptical of individual-focused environmental messaging. When I hear corporations or politicians telling ordinary people to 'do their part' while those same institutions fight against meaningful environmental regulations, I deliberately question whether my individual actions are the best focus for environmental energy." (Participant 10, Kalutara, 37)

This critical resistance aligns with Mustalahti and Agrawal's (2020) analysis of how responsibilization can generate backlash when perceived as hypocritical or unfairly distributed. Through green governmentality, this represents how governance mechanisms can generate opposition when they fail to address power imbalances in environmental responsibility distribution.

Particularly noteworthy was how participants created alternative frameworks for environmental engagement outside mainstream sustainability narratives:

> "Rather than focusing on buying 'green' products, I've joined a community farming cooperative where we share locally grown produce, exchange seeds, and maintain traditional agricultural knowledge. This approach feels more genuinely sustainable than participating in market-based 'green consumption' that still perpetuates excessive consumption patterns." (Participant 25, Monaragala, 49)

This alternative engagement supports Soneryd and Uggla's (2015) argument that environmental citizenship can manifest in forms that challenge rather than reinforce market-based sustainability frameworks. Through green governmentality, this represents how individuals create counter-narratives that reframe environmental responsibility beyond individualized consumer choices.

4.2.4 Barriers and Enablers of Green Consumption

Economic factors emerged as the most significant barrier to green consumption, revealing how financial constraints fundamentally limit the effectiveness of

responsibilization approaches that assume universal capacity for environmental participation.

Participants across demographic groups identified the price premium on sustainable products as a critical barrier:

> "Eco-friendly products consistently cost more—sometimes significantly more—than conventional alternatives. Organic food, natural cleaning products, energy-efficient appliances, and sustainable clothing all come with price premiums that make them inaccessible to many consumers, regardless of environmental awareness or intentions." (Participant 11, Kalutara, 34)

This economic barrier supports Yan et al. (2021) critique that green consumption is often positioned as an aspirational lifestyle accessible primarily to privileged groups. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how environmental responsibility is effectively distributed according to economic capacity rather than universal citizenship.

Middle-income participants described experiencing particular tension between environmental awareness and economic constraints:

> "I understand what the 'right' environmental choices are, but my budget forces difficult trade-offs. When choosing between feeding my family nutritious food and buying organic, or between reliable transportation and lower emissions, economic necessity wins despite environmental concerns. This creates a constant sense of falling short of environmental expectations." (Participant 12, Kandy, 39)

This tension reflects what Bankel and Solér (2025) identify as "ethical compromise," where economic constraints force environmentally conscious consumers to make choices that contradict their values. Through green governmentality, this represents how environmental norms create moral pressure without addressing the material conditions necessary for compliance.

Rural participants described different economic calculations regarding sustainability:

> "For us, sustainability isn't about paying more for special products—it's about economic necessity that happens to benefit the environment. We save seeds because buying new ones is expensive. We repair items because replacements are costly. We minimize waste because resources are precious. This 'sustainability by necessity' operates independently from market-based green consumption." (Participant 23, Anuradhapura, 58)

This alternative economic relationship with sustainability aligns with Ghaffar and Islam's (2024) concept of "inherent sustainability," where environmental practices emerge from economic necessity rather than deliberate green consumption. Through green governmentality, this represents how alternative sustainability models exist outside market-based environmental frameworks but remain largely unrecognized within formal sustainability governance.

The research identified complex interactions between cultural factors and sustainable consumption, revealing how existing practices, lifestyle demands, and cultural values significantly influence environmental engagement.

Urban participants described how contemporary lifestyle demands often conflict with environmental expectations:

> "Modern urban life is structured in ways that make sustainable choices difficult. Long commutes make public transportation impractical. Work schedules leave limited time for home cooking, leading to convenience foods with excessive packaging. The pace of urban living creates fundamental tensions with the slower, more deliberate pace that sustainability often requires." (Participant 7, Colombo, 34)

This structural conflict supports Ramphal's (2024) analysis of how contemporary economic and social systems create fundamental barriers to sustainable living despite increasing environmental awareness. Through green governmentality, this represents a governance contradiction where environmental behaviors are normalized without addressing the systemic conditions that make them impractical.

Cultural consumption norms emerged as significant influences on sustainable behavior:

> "Sri Lankan hospitality traditions often conflict with waste reduction goals. Serving guests abundant food is culturally important, even when it leads to waste. Using disposable items for large family gatherings is seen as practical and hygienic. These cultural values aren't easily overridden by environmental concerns, especially for older generations." (Participant 15, Galle, 47)

This cultural navigation reflects what Tan et al. (2016) identify as "cultural sustainability tensions," where environmental practices conflict with valued cultural norms. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how environmental expectations that ignore cultural contexts create implementation barriers despite individual environmental awareness.

Rural participants described how traditional practices often align with sustainability principles:

> "Many traditional practices are inherently sustainable—using banana leaves instead of plastic, preserving foods through natural methods, maintaining seed diversity through community exchange networks. These cultural traditions represent centuries of ecological knowledge that deserves recognition within sustainability frameworks." (Participant 28, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This cultural-environmental alignment supports Konalingam et al.'s (2024) argument that traditional ecological knowledge often embodies sustainable principles despite operating outside formal environmental frameworks. Through green governmentality, this represents how alternative sustainability knowledge

systems exist but remain marginalized within dominant environmental governance approaches.

A fundamental driver for many participants, particularly those with higher education levels, was genuine concern for environmental degradation and ecological well-being. This intrinsic motivation transcended mere compliance with social norms or policy requirements:

> "My primary motivation for making sustainable choices is genuine concern about climate change and environmental destruction. Reading about coral reef degradation along Sri Lanka's coast and experiencing increasingly erratic monsoon patterns has made environmental protection feel urgent and personal rather than abstract." (Participant 6, Colombo, 43)

This environmental concern often stemmed from direct observation of ecological changes, as a farmer from Anuradhapura explained:

> "We've watched our local water sources become less reliable over the years, with wells running dry earlier each season and rainfall patterns becoming unpredictable. These tangible changes motivate our conservation efforts more powerfully than any government campaign or corporate message could." (Participant 22, Anuradhapura, 58)

This finding aligns with research by Farrow et al. (2017) showing that firsthand experience of environmental change creates more durable motivation for sustainable behavior than abstract knowledge alone. Through the lens of responsibilization theory, this represents how environmental responsibility can become internally motivated rather than externally imposed when connected to tangible ecological concerns.

Health benefits emerged as a powerful motivator for sustainable consumption, often superseding purely environmental considerations, particularly among middle-income participants with families:

> "My initial shift toward organic products wasn't primarily environmental—it was concern about pesticide exposure affecting my children's health. The environmental benefits became an important secondary consideration, but health remains my primary motivation for paying premium prices for organic options." (Participant 12, Kandy, 39)

Rural participants similarly described health motivations, though often framed through traditional knowledge systems:

> "Our community has long understood the connection between environmental and human health. Traditional farming methods avoid chemicals not just for soil health but because we recognize these substances eventually return to our bodies through food and water. This holistic health understanding motivates many of our sustainable practices." (Participant 28, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This health motivation represents what Tian and Liu (2022) identify as "co-benefit recognition," where consumers are motivated by multiple advantageous outcomes

from sustainable choices. Through green governmentality, this represents how environmental behaviors can be effectively promoted through multiple benefit frameworks rather than purely ecological messaging.

For many participants, particularly those with middle incomes, economic benefits provided significant motivation for certain sustainable practices, especially those involving energy and resource efficiency:

> "Energy-efficient appliances, LED lighting, and water conservation fixtures all represent investments that reduce monthly utility expenses. These economic benefits make sustainability feel practical rather than purely idealistic, especially when the initial investment pays for itself through consistent savings." (Participant 9, Gampaha, 29)

Rural participants described economic motivations embedded within traditional practices:

> "Our sustainable farming approaches aren't separate from economic considerations—they're integral to them. Saving seeds reduces input costs. Maintaining soil health ensures continued productivity without expensive fertilizers. These practices represent economic wisdom passed through generations." (Participant 23, Anuradhapura, 58)

This economic motivation aligns with Nekmahmud et al.'s (2022) research on how financial benefits can drive sustainable behavior when clearly demonstrated and tangible. Through responsibilization theory, this represents how environmental engagement becomes more accessible when aligned with economic self-interest rather than presented as a moral obligation potentially at odds with financial wellbeing.

Social dynamics emerged as powerful motivators for sustainable consumption, particularly in contexts where environmental behaviors had become normative:

> "When everyone in my office brings reusable water bottles and lunch containers, using disposables feels awkward and draws negative attention. This social pressure probably influences my daily habits more consistently than my abstract environmental beliefs, creating automatic behavior patterns rather than conscious decisions." (Participant 4, Colombo, 31)

The research revealed how sustainability norms operate differently across communities:

> "In our neighborhood, certain environmental practices have become expected behaviors—separating recyclables, avoiding excessive packaging, participating in community clean-ups. These social expectations create consistent motivation that operates almost automatically, reinforced through community recognition and belonging." (Participant 7, Colombo, 34)

Rural participants described different social motivation systems:

> "Our sustainable practices are reinforced through intergenerational knowledge transfer and community recognition. Young farmers gain respect by demonstrating ecological knowledge and stewardship. This social validation creates powerful motivation within our community context without requiring external environmental messaging." (Participant 19, Monaragala, 60)

This social motivation supports Sharma et al.'s (2024) analysis of how community norms can drive sustainable behavior more effectively than individual values alone. Through green governmentality, this represents how environmental norms can become self-reinforcing through social dynamics rather than requiring continuous institutional promotion.

Concern for future generations provided significant motivation for sustainable behaviors among many participants, particularly those with children:

> "Thinking about what kind of environmental legacy we're leaving for our children and grandchildren creates powerful motivation for sustainable choices. This long-term perspective makes immediate inconveniences or costs seem insignificant compared to the importance of preserving environmental quality for future generations." (Participant 8, Gampaha, 36)

Rural participants expressed similar intergenerational concerns through cultural frameworks:

> "Our traditional understanding sees land as something borrowed from future generations rather than owned by the present one. This perspective creates responsibility to maintain environmental health not just for immediate benefit but as a sacred trust for those who will come after us." (Participant 27, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This future orientation aligns with research by Tian and Liu (2022) on how intergenerational considerations can motivate environmental behavior despite personal costs. Through responsibilization theory, this represents how environmental responsibility can become meaningful when connected to legacy concerns rather than presented as abstract obligations.

These diverse motivations for green consumption demonstrate that environmental engagement in Sri Lanka is driven by complex interactions between personal values, social dynamics, cultural frameworks, and practical considerations. Understanding these motivational factors provides crucial insights for developing more effective sustainability governance approaches that align with existing motivational structures rather than relying solely on external incentives or moral imperatives.

4.2.5 Urban-Rural Differences in Green Consumption

When it comes to sustainability discourses, urban participants described constant exposure to multiple, overlapping sustainability narratives:

> "Living in Colombo means continuous exposure to environmental messaging—corporate sustainability campaigns on billboards, government environmental programs on television, international climate change discussions online, and social sustainability trends through peers. This creates a saturated environmental discourse landscape that shapes how we understand ecological responsibility." (Participant 1, Colombo, 36)

This discourse concentration reflects what Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez (2020) identify as "environmental subject formation through discourse saturation," where multiple governance actors collectively establish environmental consciousness through overlapping messaging. Through green governmentality, this represents how urban spaces become concentrated sites of environmental norm circulation.

Rural participants described more limited and fragmented exposure to formal sustainability discourses:

> "Environmental information reaches us irregularly—occasional government announcements on radio, visiting agricultural extension officers, or community meetings about specific conservation projects. We don't experience the constant environmental messaging that seems present in cities, creating gaps in our awareness of formal sustainability frameworks." (Participant 30, Mullaitivu, 45)

This discourse gap supports Kotsila et al.'s (2023) observation that sustainability governance primarily targets urban populations, creating participation barriers for rural communities despite their potentially greater vulnerability to environmental challenges. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how environmental responsibility is unevenly distributed through information access disparities.

Perhaps most significantly, the research revealed how limited discourse exposure affects capacity for participation in formal sustainability governance:

> "Without regular exposure to environmental terminology and frameworks, rural communities often lack the 'language of sustainability' necessary to engage with formal environmental governance. This linguistic exclusion prevents meaningful participation in policy discussions and program development despite having valuable ecological knowledge to contribute." (Participant 27, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This linguistic barrier aligns with Konalingam et al.'s (2024) analysis of how sustainability discourse often excludes alternative knowledge systems through specialized terminology and conceptual frameworks. Through green governmentality, this represents how knowledge hierarchies within environmental governance create participation barriers despite widespread environmental concern.

The research uncovered significant differences in how sustainability is practiced across urban and rural contexts, with formal market-based green consumption predominating in urban areas while traditional ecological practices persist in rural settings.

Urban participants frequently conceptualized sustainability through formal consumption choices and certified products:

> "In the city, being environmentally conscious means making specific consumption choices—choosing products with eco-certification, supporting brands with sustainability commitments, participating in formal recycling programs, and using designated green services. These structured environmental practices are made possible through market access and sustainability infrastructure." (Participant 5, Colombo, 35)

This formal sustainability engagement reflects what Sheth and Parvatiyar (2021) identify as "market-driven green consumption," where environmental participation occurs primarily through recognized consumption channels. Through green governmentality, this represents how urban environmental subjectivity is constructed through market participation rather than alternative sustainability frameworks.

Rural participants described sustainability practices embedded in traditional knowledge systems:

> "Our community maintains sustainable agricultural practices passed through generations—crop rotation methods that preserve soil fertility, water conservation techniques adapted to local rainfall patterns, and seed preservation systems that maintain biodiversity. These practices represent sophisticated ecological knowledge despite operating outside formal environmental certification frameworks." (Participant 18, Monaragala, 49)

This alternative sustainability system supports Konalingam et al.'s (2024) argument that traditional ecological knowledge often embodies sustainable principles despite lacking recognition within formal environmental governance. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how certain sustainability practices remain excluded from legitimate environmental citizenship despite their ecological effectiveness.

The research identified fundamental tensions between these formal and informal sustainability systems:

> "When rural communities with generations of sustainable practices are labeled 'environmentally uneducated' because they don't use recognized terminology or participate in formal green consumption, it reveals the power dynamics embedded in sustainability governance. This delegitimization of traditional ecological knowledge represents a significant gap in our environmental discourse." (Participant 20, Badulla, 53)

This knowledge tension aligns with Harris's (2003) critique of how environmental governance often privileges Western, scientific, and market-based sustainability frameworks while marginalizing indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge. Through green governmentality, this represents how power operates through knowledge validation within environmental governance, determining which sustainability practices receive recognition and support.

When it comes to accessibility and infrastructure challenges, urban participants identified specific infrastructure gaps that limited sustainable choices:

> "Even in Colombo, infrastructure limitations restrict environmental options. Inconsistent waste collection makes recycling difficult. Limited public transportation increases car dependency. Apartment living restricts renewable energy options. These systemic barriers constrain sustainable choices despite environmental awareness and market access." (Participant 2, Colombo, 33)

This infrastructure challenge reflects what Arekrans et al. (2022) identify as "structural sustainability barriers," where infrastructure limitations constrain environmental action despite individual environmental intentions. Through green governmentality, this represents a governance contradiction where environmental behaviors are normalized without developing the infrastructure necessary for implementation.

Rural participants described more fundamental infrastructure gaps:

> "Basic environmental infrastructure is often completely absent in rural areas—no waste management systems, limited access to renewable energy technology, and minimal sustainable agriculture support. Without these foundational systems, many formal sustainability practices remain practically impossible regardless of environmental awareness." (Participant 21, Badulla, 53)

This infrastructure disparity supports Dąbrowski et al.'s (2022) analysis of how urban-rural development inequalities create uneven sustainability landscapes. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how environmental responsibilities are transferred to individuals without the necessary infrastructure to fulfill them, creating fundamental implementation barriers.

Transportation constraints particularly affected rural sustainable consumption:

> "Distance creates significant barriers to green consumption in rural areas. The nearest store selling eco-friendly products might be hours away, making regular sustainable shopping impractical. The carbon footprint of traveling to access green products might outweigh their environmental benefits, creating a sustainability paradox." (Participant 28, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This geographical constraint aligns with Wang et al.'s (2014) observation that spatial distribution of sustainable consumption opportunities creates fundamental access barriers in rural regions. Through green governmentality, this represents

how urban-centric sustainability frameworks fail to account for geographical realities that shape environmental participation possibilities.

4.2.6 Effectiveness of Existing Sustainability Policies and Initiatives

The research revealed significant variation in awareness of and engagement with government sustainability initiatives, with implementation gaps undermining policy effectiveness despite increasing environmental regulation.

Urban participants demonstrated greater policy awareness but expressed skepticism regarding implementation:

> "Sri Lanka has developed numerous environmental policies—plastic bans, waste segregation requirements, energy efficiency standards, and sustainable development frameworks. However, implementation remains inconsistent, with limited enforcement, inadequate infrastructure development, and minimal follow-through. This gap between policy development and implementation undermines government environmental credibility." (Participant 3, Colombo, 32)

This implementation gap reflects what Samarasinghe (2015) identifies as a critical weakness in environmental governance, where policy formulation occurs without adequate implementation capacity. Through green governmentality, this represents a governance failure where environmental frameworks exist primarily as discursive rather than practical interventions.

Rural participants reported minimal engagement with formal environmental policies:

> "Environmental policies rarely reach our community in meaningful ways. We might hear announcements about national conservation initiatives or plastic bans, but implementation support, monitoring systems, and educational resources never materialize. This creates a sense that environmental policies are urban phenomena with limited rural relevance." (Participant 24, Anuradhapura, 42)

This engagement gap supports Tan et al.'s (2016) observation that rural communities often experience policy exclusion despite being significantly affected by environmental challenges. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how environmental governance often operates unevenly across geographical contexts, creating participation disparities despite universal environmental impact.

Participants across demographic groups identified communication failures as significant policy limitations:

> "Environmental policies are often announced without adequate explanation of their rationale, implementation methods, or expected outcomes. This communication gap creates confusion about policy requirements, resistance to environmental regulations

> perceived as arbitrary, and missed opportunities for meaningful public participation in sustainability governance." (Participant 10, Kalutara, 37)

This communication challenge aligns with Tissera et al.'s (2017) analysis of how inadequate environmental communication undermines policy effectiveness despite regulatory frameworks. Through green governmentality, this represents how governance mechanisms often fail to establish the discursive foundations necessary for successful policy implementation.

Participants offered insightful recommendations for enhancing sustainability governance effectiveness, revealing sophisticated understanding of current limitations and potential improvements.

Economic accessibility emerged as a primary improvement area:

> "Sustainability governance needs to address affordability barriers directly rather than assuming consumers can absorb green premiums. This could include subsidies for eco-friendly products, scaled environmental incentives based on income level, and taxation policies that ensure sustainable options cost less than environmentally harmful alternatives." (Participant 8, Gampaha, 36)

This recommendation supports Argüelles' (2021) argument that effective environmental governance must address economic barriers rather than relying on market-based approaches alone. Through green governmentality, this represents how governance reform could create more inclusive sustainability frameworks by addressing material conditions that shape environmental participation.

Implementation strengthening was consistently identified as essential:

> "Sri Lanka needs to focus on implementing existing environmental policies rather than continually developing new frameworks. This requires dedicated enforcement mechanisms, adequate infrastructure development, clear accountability systems, and consistent monitoring to ensure policies translate from paper to practice." (Participant 5, Colombo, 35)

This implementation focus reflects Samarasinghe's (2015) analysis that policy effectiveness requires robust implementation systems rather than merely regulatory frameworks. Through responsibilization theory, this reveals how governance reform could create more balanced environmental responsibility distribution between institutions and individuals.

Knowledge integration was highlighted as a critical improvement area:

> "Environmental governance needs to incorporate diverse knowledge systems, particularly traditional ecological practices from rural communities. This integration would create more culturally appropriate and contextually effective sustainability approaches while recognizing the environmental contributions of populations currently excluded from formal sustainability recognition." (Participant 27, Polonnaruwa, 55)

This knowledge integration recommendation aligns with Konalingam et al.'s (2024) argument that effective environmental governance requires incorporating traditional ecological knowledge alongside scientific frameworks. Through green governmentality, this represents how governance reform could expand legitimate environmental knowledge, creating more inclusive sustainability frameworks.

4.2.7 Theoretical Synthesis: Green Governmentality and Responsibilization in Sri Lankan Context

This thematic analysis through green governmentality and responsibilization lenses reveals the complex and often contradictory ways in which sustainability governance shapes consumer behavior in Sri Lanka. Several theoretical insights emerge from this analysis, illuminating the unique manifestations and limitations of these governance approaches within Sri Lanka's socioeconomic and geographical landscape.

First, green governmentality in Sri Lanka operates through uneven distribution of environmental discourse, with urban centers experiencing intensive environmental norm circulation while rural areas receive limited exposure to formal sustainability frameworks. This governance disparity creates what Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez (2020) term "graduated environmental citizenship," where certain populations are more deliberately constructed as environmental subjects through concentrated governance mechanisms. This uneven distribution undermines the effectiveness of green governmentality approaches that assume uniform environmental discourse exposure across populations.

Second, responsibilization in Sri Lanka reveals significant contradictions between assigned environmental responsibilities and structural capacity to fulfill them. Economic constraints, infrastructure limitations, and knowledge barriers create substantial gaps between environmental expectations and practical possibilities, particularly for lower-income and rural populations. This contradiction aligns with Soneryd and Uggla's (2015) critique of responsibilization as a governance strategy that often fails to acknowledge material conditions necessary for environmental participation. The Sri Lankan context particularly highlights how economic constraints fundamentally limit the effectiveness of market-based sustainability frameworks despite increasing environmental awareness.

Third, alternative sustainability systems operate extensively throughout Sri Lanka, particularly in rural areas where traditional ecological practices exist largely outside formal environmental governance recognition. These alternative systems represent what Konalingam et al. (2024) identify as "vernacular sustainability"—environmentally beneficial practices embedded in cultural traditions and economic necessity rather than deliberate green consumption. The persistence of these alternative sustainability frameworks challenges dominant

green governmentality approaches that privilege market-based environmental participation while marginalizing traditional ecological knowledge.

Fourth, consumer agency manifests through sophisticated negotiation strategies rather than passive acceptance of environmental responsibility. Participants across demographic groups demonstrated critical engagement with sustainability governance, developing personal criteria for evaluating environmental claims, selectively engaging with green practices based on practical constraints, and creating alternative sustainability approaches outside formal governance frameworks. This agency aligns with Bankel and Solér's (2025) concept of "negotiated environmental responsibility," where consumers actively interpret and reshape their environmental roles rather than uncritically accepting assigned positions within sustainability governance.

Finally, effective sustainability governance in Sri Lanka requires addressing fundamental structural barriers rather than merely promoting environmental awareness or market-based solutions. Economic constraints, infrastructure limitations, and knowledge hierarchies create systematic exclusion from environmental participation despite widespread ecological concern. Addressing these structural barriers aligns with Wang's (2015) argument that green governmentality must engage with material conditions shaping environmental possibilities rather than focusing exclusively on discourse construction and norm circulation.

These theoretical insights collectively demonstrate that green governmentality and responsibilization in Sri Lanka operate through complex power dynamics that both enable and constrain sustainable consumption. By revealing these dynamics, this analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of sustainability governance in practice, highlighting both its potential for promoting environmental consciousness and its limitations in addressing structural barriers to sustainable consumption.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Addressing Research Objectives and Questions

The findings revealed highly diverse conceptualizations of green consumption shaped by geographical location, socioeconomic position, and cultural context. Urban consumers increasingly adopt globalized sustainability narratives promoted through media and corporate marketing, while rural populations engage with environmental responsibility through cultural frameworks that predate formal green governance mechanisms. This diversity challenges monolithic approaches to sustainability governance that presume uniform understanding and engagement. Effective environmental governance must acknowledge and incorporate diverse sustainability frameworks rather than imposing standardized approaches that privilege certain knowledge systems while marginalizing others.

The research identified sophisticated patterns of engagement, where consumers selectively navigate environmental expectations based on practical constraints, personal values, and perceived authenticity of initiatives. Economic constraints, trust deficits, and structural barriers emerged as primary factors influencing these responses. Participants across demographic groups questioned the disproportionate focus on individual responsibility relative to institutional accountability, particularly when economic realities limited their capacity for environmental participation. This critique fundamentally challenges responsibilization approaches that frame sustainability primarily as consumer choice rather than collective responsibility requiring structural reform.

Economic constraints emerged as the most significant barrier, with the price premium on sustainable products creating fundamental limitations for lower and middle-income participants despite environmental awareness. Infrastructure limitations, particularly in rural areas, further restricted engagement regardless of environmental intention. Key enablers included health concerns (often providing stronger motivation than abstract environmental benefits), cultural values connected to traditional resource conservation, and social influence through community norms. These findings highlight the need for governance approaches that address structural barriers while leveraging existing enablers, particularly cultural frameworks that already align with sustainability principles.

The findings revealed significant implementation gaps, credibility challenges, and inclusivity limitations across governance mechanisms. Eco-labeling programs suffered from consumer confusion and accessibility barriers; government sustainability incentives faced implementation challenges; and corporate sustainability marketing generated widespread skepticism regarding authenticity. These effectiveness challenges were particularly pronounced in rural contexts, where formal governance mechanisms were often entirely absent or implemented

without consideration of local conditions. Community-based environmental initiatives frequently received more positive assessments than top-down governance mechanisms, suggesting the importance of participatory approaches that engage local knowledge and address context-specific challenges.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research contributes three significant theoretical insights to the fields of environmental governance, consumer studies, and sustainability transitions.

5.2.1 Rethinking Green Governmentality in Developing Contexts

The findings challenge and extend existing frameworks of green governmentality by revealing its distinct manifestations within Sri Lanka's socio-economic landscape. While conventional theory emphasizes how environmental subjects are constructed through formal governance mechanisms, this research demonstrates that such mechanisms operate unevenly across contexts, creating "graduated environmental citizenship" where certain populations experience more intensive governance than others. This uneven distribution creates governance gaps where alternative sustainability frameworks persist, particularly in rural areas where traditional ecological practices operate outside formal recognition. Green governmentality in Sri Lanka functions not only through formal policies and market mechanisms but through complex cultural dynamics, social expectations, and identity construction—revealing how environmental governance becomes embedded in everyday life through pathways beyond conventional policy instruments.

5.2.2 Challenging Responsibilization in Contexts of Inequality

The research advances critiques of responsibilization by demonstrating how this governance approach operates within contexts of substantial socioeconomic inequality. By documenting how economic constraints fundamentally limit consumer capacity to fulfill assigned environmental responsibilities, the study reveals the inherent contradictions of approaches that presume universal capacity for environmental participation regardless of material conditions. These findings contribute to scholarship on "environmental inequality," where responsibilities and burdens are unevenly distributed across socioeconomic groups. The study extends understanding of how consumers navigate responsibilization pressures through sophisticated strategies of negotiation, selective engagement, and alternative practice development—challenging simplistic models of environmental compliance or resistance.

5.2.3 Integrating Urban and Rural Sustainability Frameworks

The research makes a significant contribution by examining sustainability governance across urban and rural contexts rather than focusing exclusively on urban consumption patterns. This integrated analysis reveals how power operates through knowledge validation within environmental governance, determining which sustainability practices receive recognition and support. By highlighting how traditional ecological knowledge often remains excluded from mainstream environmental discourse despite its practical sustainability contributions, the research contributes to critical scholarship on environmental knowledge hierarchies. The findings demonstrate that effective sustainability transitions require governance approaches that bridge urban-rural divides, integrating diverse knowledge systems rather than imposing standardized frameworks.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings have significant practical implications for stakeholders promoting sustainable consumption in Sri Lanka and similar developing contexts.

5.3.1 Policy Design and Implementation

For policymakers, three key recommendations emerged from the research findings. First, sustainability policies must address economic accessibility directly rather than assuming consumers can absorb green premiums. This includes developing targeted subsidy programs for eco-friendly products, creating scaled environmental incentives based on income level, and implementing taxation policies that ensure sustainable options cost less than environmentally harmful alternatives. Second, policy implementation requires significant strengthening through dedicated enforcement mechanisms, adequate infrastructure investment, clear accountability systems, and consistent monitoring. This is particularly critical in rural areas where implementation was found to be especially weak. Third, more integrated approaches to sustainability governance should recognize and build upon existing ecological practices rather than imposing standardized frameworks. Programs that document and support traditional farming methods, resource conservation practices, and community-based environmental initiatives could leverage sustainability principles already embedded in local practices.

5.3.2 Corporate Sustainability Strategies

For businesses, the research highlights three critical areas for improvement. First, addressing trust deficits through enhanced transparency and consistency in environmental practices is essential. Businesses must move beyond selective sustainability reporting to more comprehensive environmental accountability, with transparent supply chain information, specific environmental impact data,

and consistency between messaging and actual practices. Second, economic accessibility challenges should be addressed rather than positioning sustainability as a premium market segment. Developing more affordable eco-friendly options and integrating sustainability into core product lines rather than creating separate "green" categories would enable broader participation while addressing concerns about selective greenwashing. Third, businesses should engage more meaningfully with diverse sustainability frameworks, particularly in rural areas. This includes recognizing traditional ecological knowledge, developing context-specific approaches, and engaging directly with community environmental priorities.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

5.4.1 Limitations of the Study

Despite efforts to ensure diversity in socio-economic and geographical representation, certain limitations in the sampling process should be acknowledged. The use of purposive snowball sampling, while effective in reaching participants with relevant insights, may have led to an overrepresentation of individuals already engaged with sustainability discourses—particularly those connected to civil society networks or environmentally oriented community initiatives. Additionally, by focusing on adults aged 25 to 60, the study did not capture the experiences of younger consumers, older adults, or those outside formal economic participation, whose engagement with sustainability may differ in important ways. These limitations underscore the need to interpret findings within the contextual boundaries of the sample, while also pointing to opportunities for further research that includes a wider range of voices.

The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential social desirability bias, where participants may have presented their environmental attitudes more favorably than their actual practices. The specific manifestations of green governmentality and responsibilization documented are shaped by Sri Lanka's particular governance structures, cultural frameworks, and economic conditions. Additionally, the research captures a snapshot rather than longitudinal changes in environmental governance and consumer perceptions. While green governmentality and responsibilization provided valuable analytical lenses, they privilege certain aspects of environmental governance while potentially obscuring others.

5.4.2 Future Research Directions

This study highlights several promising avenues for further research. Future research could examine how sustainability governance and consumer perceptions evolve over time in response to policy changes, market developments, and

shifting environmental conditions. Extending findings through comparative studies across multiple developing country contexts would allow more robust theoretical development by identifying both common patterns and context-specific manifestations of environmental governance. Complementing qualitative findings with quantitative assessment of economic barriers to sustainable consumption would provide more precise understanding of affordability thresholds across product categories and income groups, potentially informing more targeted policy interventions.

Additionally, more focused examination of traditional ecological knowledge systems, documenting specific sustainable practices in rural communities and analyzing their environmental outcomes relative to formal sustainability frameworks, would contribute to more inclusive environmental governance. Systematic impact evaluation of community-based environmental initiatives, which this study identified as potentially more effective than top-down governance mechanisms, would provide valuable insights for developing more participatory governance models that truly engage stakeholders at all levels.

As this research has shown, the path toward sustainable consumption in Sri Lanka requires navigating complex intersections of governance, culture, and economics. While this study has illuminated how green governmentality shapes consumer awareness and practice, much remains to be discovered about creating governance frameworks that are both environmentally effective and socially inclusive. By building on the foundations established here, future researchers can help bridge the divide between urban and rural sustainability paradigms, between traditional ecological knowledge and formal governance mechanisms, and between individual responsibility and structural transformation. Such work is not merely academic—it is essential for developing environmental governance that recognizes diverse voices, addresses fundamental inequalities, and creates pathways to sustainability that are accessible to all Sri Lankans, regardless of their economic status or geographical location. The future of green consumption in Sri Lanka depends not just on what consumers know or value, but on how governance structures enable or constrain their capacity to participate in environmental citizenship.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions Guide:

Section 1: Let's Talk About Green Consumption

1. If I say "green consumption," what comes to your mind? How would you explain it in your own words?
2. Have you ever come across terms like "eco-friendly products," "sustainable consumption," or "carbon footprint"?
   - Where did you first hear about them? (e.g., TV, social media, work, friends)
   - Do these terms mean anything to you personally?
3. How do you think the government, businesses, or the media influence the way people understand green consumption?
   - Can you think of any campaigns, policies, or messages that stood out to you?
4. In the past few years, have you noticed Sri Lanka doing more to promote green consumption?
   - If yes, what changes have you seen?
   - If not, why do you think that is?
5. Before you buy something, do you actively look for sustainable or eco-friendly options?
   - If yes, what makes you choose them?
   - If no, what holds you back?

Section 2: Responsibility – Who Should Take the Lead?

6. Do you feel personally responsible for helping the environment through your everyday purchases?
   - Why do you feel this way?
   - Or do you think this is something that should be handled by the government or companies instead?
7. Have you made any changes in your daily life to be more eco-friendly? (For example, using less plastic, choosing green products, recycling more, etc.)
   - What motivated you to do so?
   - If you haven't, what makes it difficult for you to do so?
8. Do you feel that the responsibility of protecting the environment is being pushed more on individuals rather than governments and corporations?
   - Is this fair? Why or why not?
9. Have you ever felt "pressured" into making green choices?
   - Maybe from ads, workplace policies, or social media trends?

- How did you feel about it? Did it influence your behavior?

10. What are the biggest factors that shape your decision to accept or reject green consumption?
    - Is it financial (e.g., cost of eco-friendly products)?
    - Is it cultural (e.g., lifestyle, convenience)?
    - Is it about trust (e.g., do you believe in the companies promoting these products)?

Section 3: What's Stopping or Motivating You?

11. What's the biggest challenge that stops you from being more eco-friendly in your shopping and daily habits?
    - Higher prices?
    - Lack of availability?
    - Not knowing which products are truly sustainable?
    - Something else?
12. Do you think eco-friendly products are too expensive?
    - If so, does that stop you from buying them?
    - If not, what matters more when making a purchase?
13. Do the people around you (friends, family, colleagues) influence your choices when it comes to green consumption?
    - Do you think people are more likely to buy sustainable products if those around them do?
14. Do you always trust products that claim to be "green" or "eco-friendly"?
    - Have you ever felt that a company was using sustainability as a marketing gimmick?
    - What would make you trust these claims more?
15. What would encourage you to choose green products more often?
    - Lower prices?
    - More reliable labels?
    - Government incentives?
    - Workplace programs?

Section 4: Are Policies & Campaigns Working?

16. Have you seen or heard of any government efforts to promote sustainability? (For example, eco-labeling, plastic bans, tax benefits for green products.)
    - Do you think these policies are effective? Why or why not?
17. What about businesses? Have corporate sustainability campaigns or eco-friendly advertisements influenced any of your buying decisions?
    - Can you think of any brands or companies that stand out in this regard?

18. Do you feel that green initiatives in Sri Lanka are accessible to people across different income levels?
    - Or do you think they only target certain groups?
19. If you could suggest one change to improve how sustainability is promoted in Sri Lanka (Green governance), what would it be?
20. How do you think Sri Lanka compares to other countries when it comes to green consumption and sustainability efforts?

Appendix 2

Interview Participants Demographics

Participant ID	Location	District	Area Type	Age	Gender
Participant 1	Dehiwala	Colombo	Urban	36	M
Participant 2	Kaduwela	Colombo	Urban	33	F
Participant 3	Kolonnawa	Colombo	Urban	32	F
Participant 4	Kesbewa	Colombo	Urban	31	M
Participant 5	Homagama	Colombo	Urban	35	M
Participant 6	Avissawella	Colombo	Urban	43	M
Participant 7	Maharagama	Colombo	Urban	34	F
Participant 8	Gampaha	Gampaha	Urban	36	F
Participant 9	Negombo	Gampaha	Urban	29	F
Participant 10	Horana	Kalutara	Urban	37	M
Participant 11	Kalutara	Kalutara	Urban	34	M
Participant 12	Peradeniya	Kandy	Urban	39	F
Participant 13	Kandy	Kandy	Urban	40	F
Participant 14	Elpitiya	Galle	Urban	50	M
Participant 15	Ambalangoda	Galle	Urban	47	M
Participant 16	Hikkaduwa	Galle	Urban	38	F
Participant 17	Ambalangoda	Galle	Urban	44	M
Participant 18	Bibile	Monaragala	Rural	49	M
Participant 19	Buttala	Monaragala	Rural	60	M
Participant 20	Haputale	Badulla	Rural	53	M

Participant 21	Bandarawela	Badulla	Rural	53	F
Participant 22	Eppawala	Anuradhapura	Rural	58	M
Participant 23	Anuradhapura	Anuradhapura	Rural	58	M
Participant 24	Mihintale	Anuradhapura	Rural	42	F
Participant 25	Medawachchiya	Anuradhapura	Rural	49	F
Participant 26	Hingurakgoda	Polonnaruwa	Rural	51	M
Participant 27	Giritale	Polonnaruwa	Rural	55	M
Participant 28	Polonnaruwa	Polonnaruwa	Rural	55	M
Participant 29	Maankulam	Mullaitivu	Rural	48	F
Participant 30	Maankulam	Mullaitivu	Rural	45	M
Participant 31	Welioya	Mullaitivu	Rural	52	M

Table 2 The interview participants from five urban districts (Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, and Galle) and five rural districts (Monaragala, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Mullaitivu.

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