

## **The Mediating Mechanism of Consumer Ethical Beliefs in Determining the Influence of Cynicism and Empathy on Green Buying Intention**

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### **Abstract**

*Green buying intention can help society and companies to achieve sustainability while balancing their marketing objectives. Although there have been many studies done in relation to green buying intention, there are still calls for research to specifically study the impact of individual factors and the impact of ethical beliefs on green buying intention. The objective of this research is to examine the influence of empathy and cynicism on green buying intention and the mediating mechanism of consumer ethical beliefs. A structured questionnaire was administered using the online platform, and 345 valid responses were collected. Partial least squares-Structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was performed to test the hypotheses using the SmartPLS 3.0 program. The results reveal that empathy and cynicism predict consumer intention to buy green products directly and indirectly through ethical beliefs. This study contributes to both literature and business practice, and may be the first research study to investigate the relationship between empathy and cynicism and green buying intention. In addition, the study helps managers to articulate marketing strategies such as empathetic and ethical focused advertising to promote green buying intentions of customers. This research will be particularly important for developing countries like Sri Lanka in promoting sustainable consumption which enhances environmental, social and future generations' well-being. Sri Lankan business firms can improve their global presence by focusing on green consumerism as now many global firms have already begun sustainable business practices.*

**Keywords:** *Green buying intention, Empathy, Cynicism, Consumer ethical beliefs, Green consumerism*

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## Introduction

In Sri Lanka, green buying, which is a subdivision of sustainable consumerism, has received a great deal of attention. Green consumers are those who are willing to purchase ecologically friendly items with minimal environmental effect contents and manufacturing processes (Jaiswal, 2012). Further, consumers are sometimes activists and threaten companies, whose irresponsible conduct has negative environmental consequences, by switching labels, refusing to purchase these commodities, or by other ways (Webb et al. 2008). To take advantage of the rising green consumer trend, businesses are designing and developing more eco-friendly goods. Thus, green buying has become a marketing opportunity for companies, resulting in green/sustainable marketing that meets changing consumer product needs and desires. As a result, the consumer green movement has facilitated promoting profit-oriented businesses to incorporate green ideas into their marketing and manufacturing operations.

Academic studies have looked at the various antecedents of green buying. Studies concentrated on determining customer demographics including gender, age and income (Mostafa, 2007). Some researchers have investigated the effect of environmental factors on green purchasing intentions (Chan & Lau, 2000). Health-related factors such as food safety and health consciousness (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008) were also factors that were found to influence green consumerism. In addition, individualism/collectivism (Lu et al., 2015), moral perspectives (Dean et al., 2008; Samarasinghe, 2012; Samarasinghe & Samarasinghe, 2010), ethical judgment (Chan et al., 2008) and ethical motives (Honkanen et al., 2006) have also been identified as factors that affect green buying.

While green consumerism research is growing, there are still gaps in the literature when it comes to understanding the individual motives that influence green buying intention. First, there has been a call for more studies on the personal factors that can influence green buying (Lu et al., 2015). Second, Vitell (2003) and Lu et al. (2015) point out that it is worth investigating the association between consumer ethical beliefs and green buying. Although consumer ethical beliefs have been identified as a factor that influences green buying intention, there has been inadequate research on the effects of personal values on consumer ethical beliefs that reflect the variable (Lu et al., 2015; Vitell, 2003). Third, the variables that are being considered as personal variables are empathy and cynicism, which are said to have an effect on ethical beliefs

(Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014), but these variables have not been examined specifically in relation to green consumerism. Lu et al. (2015) have considered two individual factors that affect ethical beliefs in green consumerism, but they call for the examination of more individual variables under this phenomenon. Further, Brown et al. (2019) have identified a need for research that investigates why empathy relates to sustainability. When considering these gaps, it is clear that it will be valuable to investigate the influence of cynicism and empathy on ethical beliefs and green buying intention. Therefore, the objective of this research is to examine the impact of empathy and cynicism on consumer ethical beliefs, and thereby to examine their impact on green buying intention. This is of particular importance to green consumerism literature since there is a lack of studies that have considered the impact of empathy and cynicism on green buying intention. The results of such an investigation could help firms motivate their consumers to buy green, and thus achieve their marketing goals by incorporating personal traits into strategy formulation.

The rest of the paper is presented in the following order: The theoretical background and formulation of hypotheses are presented subsequently, followed by the research design. Next, the researcher presents her empirical findings. Finally, the researcher analyzes the findings and draws conclusions that might be useful to both academics and practitioners.

## **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

### ***Green Buying Intention***

Due to its many forms and definitions, green marketing is a broad and complex concept. The areas “green marketing”, “ecological marketing”, “environmental marketing” and “sustainable marketing”, all encompass social and ecological obligations from an academic standpoint. Under these broad concepts many researchers have studied green buying behavior, green consumerism or sustainable consumption (eg: Akehurst et al., 2012; Jaiswal and Singh, 2018). Green buying behavior is largely focused with the purchasing decisions of customers of items that are assumed to be environmentally friendly, conservable, and avoid unnecessary packaging and hazardous substances that hurt people and the environment (Akehurst et al., 2012; Tan, 2011). Similarly, according to Jaiswal (2012), "green consumerism" or "sustainable consumption" refers to the activities of consumers who want to buy ecologically friendly items with minimal environmental effect contents and production processes. Green consumerism includes behaviors such as recycling, consuming sustainable foods, purchasing items made of recycled materials, and applying

environmental considerations in business policies (Jaiswal and Singh, 2018). Simply put, these terms refer to the growing practice of using modern production, packaging and marketing methods to mitigate adverse environmental impacts. Green buying practices save natural resources, safeguard the environment, and are seen as a form of ethical consumer behavior. Green buying intention is the expression of willingness to purchase sustainable products (Jaiswal and Singh, 2018). Researchers in the field of green consumer psychology have all agreed that intention is a key determinant of buying behavior, and that it is therefore possible to measure green consumer buying through consumer intention (Akehurst et al., 2012; Jaiswal and Singh, 2018; Wei et al., 2017) from an ethical perspective.

### ***Empathy***

Only in the twentieth century did the English word “empathy” become widely used (Slote, 2007). Previously, the term “sympathy” was used to describe what is now referred to as empathy. Sympathy is now more narrowly defined as feeling sad for or sympathetic towards someone. The term “empathy” is a transcription of the ancient Greek word *empathia*, which means “passion”. In the morality literature, empathy has received much attention (see Batson, 2011). According to Baron-Cohen (2012) empathy is: “our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion” (p. 12). When Adam Smith spoke of the moral emotions of pity and compassion in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he mentioned that “it is the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it” (Smith 1759/2009, p. 11).

### ***Empathy and green buying intention***

Understanding the mental stress of others and being sensitive towards others is referred to as empathy (Hollin, 1994). Empathy leads to altruism, cooperation, and pro-social behavior, according to the literature in moral psychology (Batson & Ahmad 2009). Brown et al. (2019) argued that empathy plays a precise role in human-environment interactions and emphasized the importance of empathy for nature conservation practices. Further, empathy has been associated with wildlife conservation as well (Myers Jr et al., 2009), showing that the empathetic perspective plays a major role in environmental concerns (Kim & Cooke, 2020). Researchers explain that empathy represents and is associated

with generosity and compassion (Allen, 2018; Rapert et al., 2021). Since empathy increases generosity, it is likely to have a favorable impact on ideas about “doing-good/recycling” activities. In addition, a person’s empathy may influence his/her concern about the future generation in a way that will prompt an interest in protecting the environment and empowering sustainability. Therefore, the researcher hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Empathy positively associates with green buying intention.

### ***Consumer Ethical Beliefs***

Consumer ethical beliefs are moral views regarding potentially unethical consumer practices. Muncy and Vitell (1992) and Vitell and Muncy (1992) advanced the consumer ethics scale to assess consumer ethical beliefs. There are four dimensions in this scale: (1) Active/illegal dimension; (2) passive dimension; (3) active/legal dimension and (4) no harm, no foul. The active/illegal dimension refers to blatantly unlawful behaviors such as altering price tags on items at a retail business, and consuming products without payment. The passive dimension refers to acts that allow customers to profit passively from the seller’s mistakes that aren’t addressed or brought to the seller’s attention, for example, lying about a child’s age to obtain a reduced price or keeping mute when given too much change. The active/legal dimension is concerned with consumer acts that are ethically dubious but not unlawful. This level includes activities such as stretching the facts on a tax return. The ‘no harm, no foul’ dimension includes activities that do not directly hurt others but are deemed unethical by some, such as burning a CD rather than purchasing one. Another component suggested by Vitell and Muncy (2005) is the doing-good/recycling dimension, which includes beneficial actions related to assisting society and/or environmental preservation. Overall, consumer ethical beliefs are linked to how much a customer is willing to tolerate dubious consumer behaviors.

### ***Empathy and Consumer Ethical Beliefs***

Empathy has been shown in the business ethics literature to lead to fewer unethical negotiating practices (Cohen, 2010), greater helping behaviors (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005) and more principle-based moral judgments (Mencl & May, 2009). Mencl and May (2009) have specified that “individuals who empathize are more likely to form highly ethical intentions” (p. 208). As empathy is related to cheating (Brown et al., 2010) and other antisocial behaviors, empathetic concern should be connected to perceptions of consumer

actions that are unjust, unfair, or harmful to others (Miller & Eisenberg 1988). Empathy evokes positive moral emotions and there is less probability that an empathetic person's beliefs are unethical, involving theft, cheating or lying. In line with the above arguments, the following hypothesis is formulated.

Hypothesis 2: Empathy positively associates with consumer ethical beliefs

### ***Consumer ethical beliefs and green buying intention***

Individual beliefs influence attitudes toward their own actions and subjective norms, which in turn influence behavioral intention (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Based on this view, Hunt and Vitell (1986, 2006) explained the relationship among ethical beliefs, moral judgments and intention. Researchers revealed that ethical beliefs influence ethical intention in a favorable manner. (Singhapakdi et al., 2000). Generally, ethics include acting in a socially responsible manner (Treviño and Brown, 2005). Therefore, ethical beliefs may include beliefs such as doing good to others and for the environment, and such customers who have ethical beliefs have greater positive intentions to act in a more fair manner when making decisions on buying. Further, researchers have stated that persons with great ethical beliefs are prone to have green buying intentions than individuals with low ethical beliefs (Lu et al., 2015). Based on the above views, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Consumer ethical beliefs positively associate with green buying intention.

### ***Empathy and green buying intention: the mediating role of consumer ethical beliefs***

Green buying intentions represent intentions to preserve the environment, natural resources, and to use ecologically friendly products, or broadly represent intentions towards environmental responsibility (Lu et al., 2015). For environmental responsibility to be present, empathy plays a major role through consumer ethical beliefs, because empathetic concerns direct consumers towards positive and ethical beliefs which influence them to do good to others as well as for the environment. Consequently, the higher the empathetic concern, the higher would be the ethical beliefs and the lower will be the intention to be environmentally irresponsible. Furthermore, through previously established relationships between empathy and consumer ethical beliefs (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014) and consumer ethical beliefs and green buying intention (Lu et al., 2015), this indirect influence of empathy on green buying intention through consumer ethical beliefs can be established empirically.

Therefore, the current researcher argues that consumers' ethical beliefs mediate the relationship between empathy and green buying intention.

Hypothesis 4: Consumer ethical beliefs mediate the association between empathy and green buying intention.

### ***Cynicism***

The origins of cynicism as a school of philosophy and a way of life can be traced back to ancient Greece (Dean et al., 1998). The term cynical used to refer to harsh critics, but currently, it refers to pessimism and skepticism (Mantere & Martinsou, 2001). Thus, while cynicism used to have a similar connotation to suspicion, disbelief and lack of trust, currently, it is more commonly associated with the terms 'critical, uneasy, and captious' (Mete, 2013). Belittlement, rage, embarrassment, and difficulty are some of the unpleasant feelings evoked by cynicism (Abraham, 2000). According to Vice (2011), cynicism is essentially immoral and incompatible with faith, hope and generosity.

### ***Cynicism and consumer ethical beliefs***

Several researches have looked at the cognitive and behavioral effects of cynicism. Detert et al. (2008) pointed out that there is a link between cynicism and unethical decision-making. According to Hochwarter et al. (2004), cynicism is associated with lower levels of organizational citizenship behavior, particularly less assistance to coworkers. Cynicism is also associated with a lack of trust. Based on the findings that cynicism leads to favorable assessments of unethical behavior (Detert et al., 2008), and that persons who are mistrustful of others are likely to embrace unethical behavior (Rotter, 1980), it may be assumed that cynicism will result in positive assessments of unethical consumer behavior. Also, because cynicism is associated with a profound skepticism and contempt for others, cynics are less inclined to participate in or support acts that benefit others. Therefore, cynics may not prioritize ethics when making decisions. Based on these arguments, the researcher puts forward the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 5: Cynicism negatively associates with consumer ethical beliefs.

### ***Cynicism and green buying intention***

A cynical person is skeptical about company practices of green marketing, as they think "green" is merely a marketing strategy to enhance profitability and will doubt whether businesses are actually acting in an environmentally sustainable manner (Do Paço & Reis, 2012). It has also been argued that

cynicism leads to questionable consumer practices which may benefit the consumer at the expense of the business or seller (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014). Thus, cynical consumers encourage marketers to produce less costly and less environmentally sustainable products that can be purchased at a lower price. Furthermore, since cynicism refers to a negative perspective on human-beings and reflects a certain amount of self-interest (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2019), cynics are less likely to respect others and act in a responsible manner. They may also be less supportive of the environment and of future generations. Similarly, Chowdhury and Fernando (2014) have argued that cynicism in consumers promotes less pro-social actions like recycling. In line with these arguments, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Cynicism negatively associates with green buying intention.

***Cynicism and green buying intention: the mediating role of consumer ethical beliefs***

The researcher argues that cynicism negatively relates to green buying intention indirectly through negative beliefs. Cynicism will not promote ethical beliefs as it associates with self-interest (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2019). Specifically, most cynics will selfishly attempt to gain benefits even at the expense of the benefits of others and of future generations, whereas selfless beliefs are fundamental in ethics and ethical beliefs relate to responsibility for the larger society. This means that cynical consumers will most probably engage in less environmentally friendly behaviors, as cynicism does not promote ethical beliefs that will benefit society. Further, it can be argued that cynical consumers will also fail to identify what is beneficial for society and the environment, as they do not bother to distinguish between the ethical and unethical (self-interested point of view), which is why cynicism associates negatively with green buying intention. Furthermore, empirical evidence for the negative relationship between cynicism and consumer ethical beliefs (Chowdhury and Fernando, 2014) as well as the relationship between consumer ethical beliefs and green buying intention (Lu et al., 2015) supports the indirect relationship between cynicism and green buying intention via consumer ethical beliefs. Based on the above arguments and support from empirical results, the researcher advances the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: Consumer ethical beliefs mediate the negative association between cynicism and green buying intention.

The above hypotheses are visually depicted in the Figure 1: Conceptual Framework.



## Conceptual framework

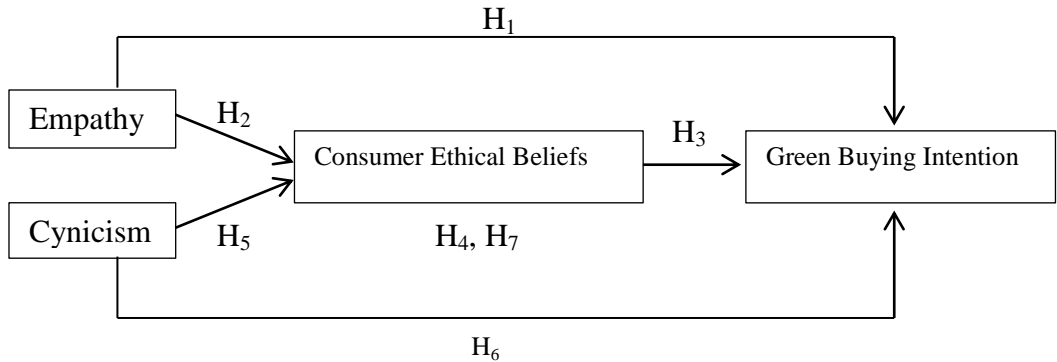


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

## Methodology

### *Participants and Procedures*

A convenience sample of Sri Lankan consumers was used to test the research model, which was based on data from an online survey questionnaire. The target audience was green consumers. In order to select green consumers, a filtering question was added to the questionnaire. If a respondent was categorized as a green consumer, he/she was asked to state his/her level of agreement with the statements. The questionnaire was distributed via email. A total of 353 valid responses were collected from a diverse group of people with various demographic backgrounds. A total of 345 questionnaires were obtained for analysis after compensating for the filtering question. Males made up 42.32 percent of the respondents, while females made up 57.68 percent. About 63 percent of those polled were between the ages of 20 and 29. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics**

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	146	42.32
Female	199	57.68
<b>Age</b>		
Under 19 years	3	0.82
20-29 years	218	63.19
30-39 years	69	20.00
40-49 years	24	6.96
50-59 years	29	8.41

	Frequency	Percentage
Over 60 years	2	0.58
<b>Education</b>		
GCE Ordinary Level	-	
GCE Advanced Level	14	4.06
Diploma or higher diploma	61	17.68
Undergraduate Degree	242	70.14
Postgraduate Degree	28	8.12
<b>Current Occupation/Student</b>		
Student	208	60.29
Public employee	37	10.73
Private employee	69	20
Entrepreneur	2	0.57
Household	29	8.41

There was no statistically significant difference between responders and non-respondents ( $p < 0.05$ ) according to the t test. These findings show that no selection bias has occurred through green consumers not taking part in the survey. To ensure that there was no common method bias, the full collinearity method was used (Kock, 2015). The VIF value obtained through analysis is less than 3.3, revealing that there is no common method bias in this study. Harman's single-factor test was also used to confirm that there was no common method bias. Multiple factors emerged as a result of the study and the first component did not account for the majority of the variance in the data.

### *Measures*

**Green Buying Intention:** Kim and Choi's (2005) scale of green buying intention was used to measure how far consumers intended to buy green products. The items on the scale were graded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". Sample key items comprise "I make special effort to buy paper and plastic products that are made from recycled material" and "I have switched products for ecological reasons".

**Consumer Ethical Beliefs:** Consumer ethical beliefs were assessed using the Muncy and Vitell (1992) and Vitell and Muncy (1992) scales, which were later revised by Vitell and Muncy (2005). This scale evaluates the morality of a set of consumer behaviors. The scale used was a 28-item one and four dimensions of consumer ethics are represented on this scale. Sample items for each dimension are: (1) Active/Illegal dimension: "drinking a can of soda in a store without paying for it", "giving misleading price information to a cashier for an unpriced item" (2) Passive dimension: "getting too much change and not saying anything", "observing someone shoplifting and ignoring" (3) Active Legal

dimension “using an expired coupon for merchandise”, “Using a coupon for merchandise you did not” (4) No Harm, No Foul dimension: “Installing software on your computer without buying it”, “Burning a CD rather than buying”. On a 5-point scale, participants were asked to score each item (1= “strongly think that it is wrong”, 5= “strongly think that it is not wrong”).

Cynicism: The updated “philosophies of human nature” scale was used to assess cynicism (Wrightsmann, 1991). This scale was changed and shortened, in a similar manner to that of Johnson and O’Leary-Kelly (2003) by picking five items. Sample items include: “If most people could get into a movie without paying and be sure that they would not be seen, they would do it”; “Most people would tell a lie if they could gain by it”. Participants used a seven-point Likert-type scale to express their agreement with the items (1= “strongly disagree” and 7= “strongly agree”).

Empathy: Empathy was assessed using a scale based on items from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index’s (IRI) aspects of perspective taking (cognitive empathy) and empathetic concern (affective empathy) (Davis, 1980). The IRI’s perspective taking and empathetic concern components have been used to measure empathy in the business ethics literature (Cohen 2010; Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014). A seven-point Likert scale, with “1 being strongly agree” and “7 being strongly disagree,” was used to assess agreement with each of the eight items (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014). Key items include: “believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both”, “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision”.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach utilizing partial least squares (PLS). The researcher used the SmartPLS 3.0 program for PLS-SEM. PLS-SEM is one of the most advanced ways of analysis, and it has become an important tool for researchers looking at a variety of social science topics. Before analyzing the overall model, the researcher made sure that the sample size for model estimation was adequate (Hair et al., 2017).

The measurement model and the structural model are both required for PLS-SEM analysis. The measurement model’s goal is to assess the validity (convergent and discriminant) and reliability of each indicator that composes the latent constructs. The measurement model’s goal is to assess the validity (convergent and discriminant) and reliability of each indicator that composes the latent constructs. (Hair et al. 2017) (Tables 2 and 3), the researcher moved on to

the second stage of analysis, namely, assessing the quality of the structural model and tested the hypotheses. Table 4 shows the results of the quality assessment of the structural model. Table 4 shows that the  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  values produced are good, ranging between 0.428 and 0.591. Furthermore, each predictor variable in the model generates an effect size value ranging from 0.181 to 0.312, putting it in the small-to-medium category. The predictive relevance value produced excellent endogenous variables, i.e.  $> 0$ , indicating that the model has predictive power. The value of the variance inflation factor (VIF) calculated for all of the independent variables in the model is  $< 3$ , indicating that the predictor variables are not collinear.

**Table 2: Assessment of Measurement Model**

Variable	Indicator FL range	Alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Green Buying Intention	0.841-0.882	0.842	0.822	0.524
Consumer Ethical Beliefs				
Active/Illegal Dimension	0.751-0.792	0.781	0.862	0.523
Passive Dimension	0.652-0.693	0.711	0.777	0.512
Active/Legal Dimension	0.624-0.659	0.706	0.762	0.522
No harm, no Foul Dimension	0.733-0.752	0.721	0.772	0.548
Cynicism	0.766-0.786	0.791	0.798	0.552
Empathy	0.725-0.821	0.786	0.811	0.621

*FL- Factor Loading; Indicator FL range  $>0.6$ ; Alpha  $>0.7$ ; Composite reliability  $> 0.7$ ; AVE $>0.5$*

**Table 3: Mean, Standard Deviation and Discriminant Validity results**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Green Buying Intention	3.89	0.88						
2. Active/Illegal Dimension	3.01	0.97	0.789					
3. Passive Dimension	2.98	0.89	0.687	0.752				
4. Active/Legal Dimension	3.12	0.87	0.878	0.622	0.682			
5. No harm, no Foul Dimension	3.88	0.85	0.776	0.762	0.744	0.732		
6. Cynicism	3.89	1.01	0.652	0.752	0.623	0.754	0.652	
7. Empathy	4.61	0.78	0.762	0.852	0.751	0.741	0.751	0.681

Below the diagonal elements are the HTMT (heterotrait–monotrait ratio) values. HTMT values < 0.90 (Hair et al. 2017)

**Table 4: Assessment of the structural model**

Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	F <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	VIF
Green Buying Intention	0.571	0.562	-	0.226	
Consumer Ethical Beliefs	0.417	0.402	0.247	-	
Cynicism	-	-	0.181	-	1.553
Empathy	-	-	0.312	-	1.622

### *Hypotheses Testing*

The repeated indicator model is recommended only when the lower order constructs have an equal number of indicators, according to Ringle et al. (2012). As a result, the structural model for higher-order latent variables was evaluated, and the higher-order structural model was used to test the hypotheses (based on 5000 subsamples). The results of the direct relationships are indicated in Table 5.

**Table 5: Results of hypotheses testing: Direct relationships**

Structural Path	$\beta$ Coefficient	p Value	Decision
Empathy → GBI	0.553**	0.000	H <sub>1</sub> supported
Empathy → CEB	0.422**	0.000	H <sub>2</sub> supported
CEB → GBI	0.626**	0.000	H <sub>3</sub> supported
Cynicism → CEB	-0.317**	0.002	H <sub>5</sub> supported
Cynicism → GBI	-0.309**	0.000	H <sub>6</sub> supported

CEB: Consumer Ethical Beliefs; GBI: Green Buying Intention; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ;

Table 5 shows that all path coefficients of the direct relationships (based on 5000 subsamples) are significant (at the  $p < 0.01$  level). According to the results of the analysis, the coefficient  $\beta$  values of the relationships Empathy → GBI ( $\beta=0.553$ ) and Empathy → CEB ( $\beta=0.422$ ) are significant ( $p=0.000$ ). Hypothesis<sub>1</sub> and Hypothesis<sub>2</sub> are therefore supported. Cynicism also has a significant negative association with GBI ( $\beta = -0.309$ ;  $P=0.000$ ) and CEB ( $\beta = -0.317$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, the CEB → GBI relationship is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.626$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). Therefore, hypotheses 3, 5 and 6 are supported.

To test the mediating hypotheses (hypotheses 4 and 7), the researcher applied Preacher and Hayes’ method (as cited in Hair et al., 2014) as it is recommended for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2014). The initial step was to assess the significance of the direct relationships of each of the two constructs (using bootstrapping for 5000 subsamples). The path coefficient of Empathy → GBI was significant ( $\beta=0.662, p=0.000$ ). Similarly, the path coefficient of Cynicism → GBI was significant as well ( $\beta=-0.453, p=0.000$ ). Subsequently, the indirect effect was assessed by including the mediating variable. The indirect effect of Empathy → CEB → GBI was significant ( $\beta=0.406, p=0.000, t \text{ value}=3.627$ ) as hypothesised (hypothesis 4) and the indirect effect of Cynicism → CEB → GBI was also significant ( $\beta=-0.316, p=0.000, t \text{ value}=4.029$ ) as per hypothesis 7. Finally, the VAF (variance accounted for) was calculated to assess the strength of the mediation. VAF was recorded as 48% and 29% for Empathy → CEB → GBI and Cynicism → CEB → GBI, respectively, so both mediation pathways can be categorised as partial mediations (Hair et al., 2014). Figure 2 illustrate the PLS-SEM output

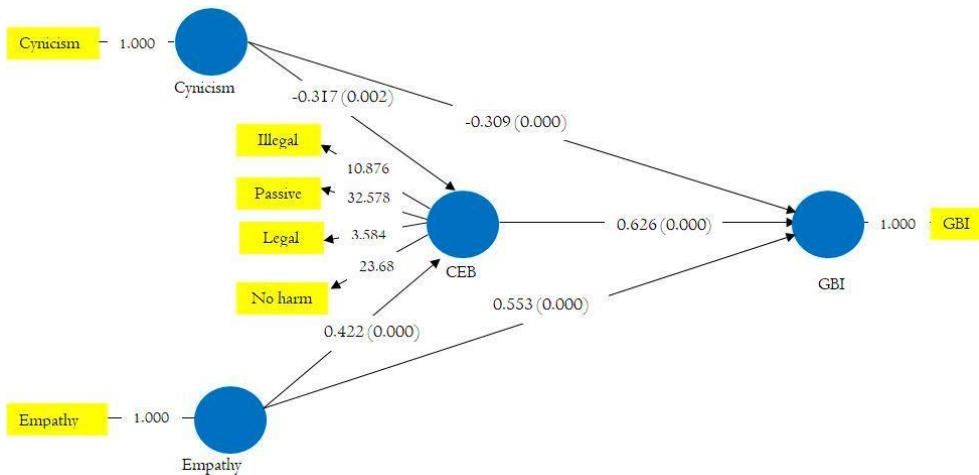


Figure 2: Structural Model Based on the Embedded Two-Stage Approach

## Discussion and Conclusion

The impact of empathy, cynicism and consumer ethics on green consumer intention was investigated in this research. Grounded on 345 Sri Lankan consumers, primary data provided support for the hypotheses and for the proposed model. The results confirmed the influence of empathy and cynicism on consumer ethical beliefs which in turn impacted consumer green buying intention. The important theoretical findings of this study are discussed below,

with special emphasis on innovative discoveries and how they connect to the findings of previous studies.

According to the findings, green buying intentions are influenced by customer ethical beliefs, and this isn't the first study to show this connection. Consumers with strong ethical awareness show a reasonably consistent urge to buy green items (D'Souza et al., 2007). Furthermore, some buyers see recycling and good practices as ethically acceptable, and they are more likely to buy green items (Lu et al., 2015). Similarly consumers reveal that they examine ethical concerns of companies when purchasing (Basgoze, 2012), meaning that they base their ethical beliefs before they make their purchase and also look at the ethical behaviour of the companies. Consumers' positive thinking such as ethical beliefs is one reason for many organisations to practice sustainable marketing (Basgoze, 2012). Moreover, firms have claimed that many attempts to social responsibility are due to the growing attention of ethical concerns by the consumers for everyday purchase (Lee, 2016). Thus, it reveals ethical beliefs play a major role in determining purchase decision. Although this relationship has been established through many empirical studies in other countries, there have not been many studies conducted in developing countries like Sri Lanka to explain these phenomena.

The research findings confirm that consumers with strong empathy are very likely to possess ethical beliefs. Individuals with empathy place greater importance on helping others and often engage in pro-social behaviour (Batson & Ahmad 2009). A study done in Italy has found that emotional empathy of consumers showed high level of purchase intention to fair chocolate (Zerbini et al., 2019). Thus, it is fair to believe that strong empathy supports a better assessment of what is ethical and unethical, and thus, empathetic consumers know that engaging in recycling activities and environmental protection activities is ethical. This result is similar to that of Detert et al. (2008), who identified a link between empathy and unethical behavior. Similarly, Chowdhury and Fernando (2014) found that empathy associated negatively to the "active/legal dimension" of consumer ethics. Further to this finding, the current researcher extended the scope of the above studies by identifying the indirect effect of empathy on green buying intention through the mediating impact of ethical consumer beliefs. This indicates that ethical consumer beliefs play an important role in forming an empathetic person's intention to buy green products. Zerbini et al. (2019) explicates that, since empathy provides a base for social responsibility (which is considered as ethical) through social bonding,

they tend to purchase ethical products. Therefore, we can conclude that empathetic persons recognize green consumerism as ethical.

Cynicism was observed to be inversely associated to ethical beliefs, which is compatible with Detert et al. (2008)'s findings that cynicism was associated positively with unethical decision-making. Similarly, Rotter (1980) and Vice (2011) have postulated the association between cynicism and unethical behaviour. Their results indicate that cynicism fails in a better assessment of ethical beliefs, such that cynics may wrongly judge the ethicality and unethicality of their actions. Further, the results of this study extend this relationship by explaining the mediating effect of consumer ethical beliefs on the relationship between cynicism and green buying intention to better clarify the reason why cynics are less likely to engage in green buying. It is also reasonable to suppose that a very cynical person has less concern for others and therefore, may not be particularly concerned for the welfare of future generations, and thus does not prioritize environmentally friendly behaviour.

Empirical studies done on understanding the influence of individual factors and consumer ethical beliefs on green buying intention are scarce (Lu et al., 2015). In attempting to fill this gap, the researcher assesses the impact of empathy and cynicism on green buying intention, as these individual antecedents have not been thoroughly studied, to the best of the researcher's knowledge. In addition, the mediating mechanism of consumer ethical beliefs was also investigated to better understand the relationship between empathy and cynicism and green buying intention. This is a vital theoretical contribution to the existing literature as it explicates why empathy and cynicism relate to green buying intention.

### ***Implications for practice***

The findings of this study have a few managerial implications. Gaining a deeper grasp of the link between consumer ethics and personal characteristics can help enhance customer relationship management strategies. First, it appears that cynicism and empathy are personal characteristics that influence consumers' ethical beliefs and green buying intention, and therefore, marketers should consider these characteristics when developing their strategies. Businesses might, for example, adapt marketing efforts to meet the expectations of customers who are more inclined to form connections with merchants and have favorable opinions toward the company. Since empathy encourages ethical beliefs and willingness to buy green products, marketers can focus on advertising strategies such as advertisements focusing on empathy and environmental credentials at different organisational levels. According to Crane



(2001), a product's ethical augmentation can take place in four ways: at the "product level" (e.g., by stating how environmentally friendly the product is), at the "marketing level" (e.g., by engaging in cause-related marketing by supporting a relevant charity), at the "corporate level" (e.g., by participating in corporate social responsibility programs), and at the "country level" (e.g., by producing products across the country to support local industries and jobs, or in countries with labor standards that protect workers' rights). Therefore, these ethical branding methods should be considered by managers in order to enhance the green buying intentions of their customers.

In order to minimize customer cynicism, managers must also discover how consumer cynicism is heightened and address those processes. Tracking customer values and comparing them to business values is one approach to counteract cynicism by reducing value inconsistency. Consumer cynicism arising from aim inconsistency can be reduced by creating items that satisfy acceptable performance criteria and honest advertising that does not set misleading expectations.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This is a cross-sectional study that captures consumer perceptions on the variables of interest in a single snapshot. The association between the independent and dependent variables was derived theoretically and verified with survey data. However, using a cross-sectional design to test these relationships does not allow for the detection of causality. To address this limitation, future studies could use experimental or longitudinal designs. Secondly, intentions to engage in various types of consumer actions were used as the dependent variable in this study. However, intentions and behavior do not always align in the realm of consumer ethics (Auger & Devinney 2007). Therefore, the dependent variable in future research could be choice or behavior. This study looked at consumer ethical beliefs as a variable that relates to green buying intention, as well as to empathy and cynicism. In order to make the investigation more comprehensive, other individual factors may need to be examined.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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