THESISES OF THE DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON PURCHASE INTENTION OF ORGANIC FOOD IN KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, global consumption patterns have shifted significantly as consumers increasingly prioritize health, food safety, and environmental sustainability. Organic food has become a preferred alternative to conventional products due to its health benefits, environmentally friendly production methods, and ethical considerations. Global organic food sales surpassed USD 130 billion in 2022 (FiBL, 2023), highlighting the growing importance of sustainable consumption. At the same time, the rise in social media marketing (SMM) has transformed how businesses interact with consumers. Unlike traditional marketing, SMM enables two-way communication, interactivity, and community building (Bilgin, 2018; Cheung et al., 2020). This is particularly critical for organic food, where consumer decisions often depend on trust, transparency, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Nguyen et al., 2021). Digital platforms not only promote awareness but also serve as educational spaces were influencers and peers shape consumer perceptions and behaviors. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, however, the organic food sector remains in its infancy. Barriers such as high prices, limited product availability, lack of certification systems, and weak supply chains hinder the growth of the sector. Despite these challenges, the region has witnessed rapid increases in internet penetration and social media usage, particularly among younger generations, creating opportunities for digital engagement. This study explores the impact of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on purchase intention for organic food, focusing on the mediating role of Sustainable Consumption Behavior (SCB). SCB reflects dimensions such as quality of life and well-being, care for environmental well-being, and responsibility toward future generations (Quoquab et al., 2019; Dimitrova et al., 2022). The study extends the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) by conceptualizing Social Media Marketing as an external digital antecedent influencing consumers' attitudinal and normative evaluations, and by positioning Sustainable Consumption Behavior as a mediating mechanism that links sustainability-oriented values to purchase intention. The extended framework therefore explains how digital engagement fosters pro-sustainability orientations that ultimately shape intention toward organic food consumption.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although research on social media marketing and sustainable consumption has grown internationally, most studies have been conducted in developed markets where organic food

industries are mature. Little is known about how SMM influences consumer purchase intentions in developing contexts like Kurdistan, where awareness of organic products is still low and structural barriers are high.

Additionally, prior research often examines either SMM or SCB in isolation, rather than investigating their combined role in influencing consumer decisions. The mediating effect of SCB between SMM and purchase intention remains underexplored, especially in transitional economies. Furthermore, existing studies rarely adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative insights, which is crucial for capturing the complexity of consumer attitudes, producer perspectives, and influencer strategies.

1.3 Research Aims and Questions

1.3.1 Research Aims and Objectives

Social media marketing has emerged as a vital element in shaping customer behavior, particularly within the organic food sector. Comprehending the influence of social media marketing and consumer involvement on purchasing decisions is crucial for enterprises and governments. This study aims:

1- To assess the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intentions.

2- To evaluate the relationship between social media marketing and sustainable consumption behavior.

3- To measure the relationship between sustainable consumption behavior and purchase intention.

4- To evaluate the mediating effect of sustainable consumption behavior between social media marketing and purchase intention.

1.3.2 Research Questions

To investigate the impact of social media marketing on purchase intention, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1- Does social media marketing have a relationship with purchase intentions?

Q2- Does social media marketing have a relationship with sustainable consumption behavior?

Q3- Does sustainable consumption behavior have a relationship with purchase intentions?

Q4-Does sustainable consumption behavior mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention?

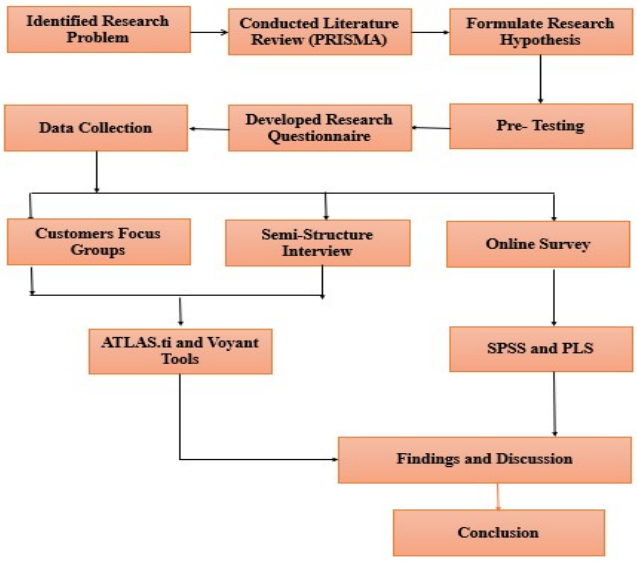
2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This dissertation adopted a sequential mixed-methods design to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media marketing (SMM) influences purchase intention (PI) for organic food via sustainable consumption behavior (SCB) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. An initial qualitative phase (semi-structured interviews with influencers and producers, plus two consumer focus groups) generated context specific insights and informed instrument wording; a subsequent quantitative survey (n = 565) enabled measurement validation and hypothesis testing using PLS-SEM (SmartPLS). A mixed methods strategy was appropriate to triangulate evidence, combine contextual depth with statistical generalizability, and strengthen the validity of inferences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Bryman, 2021).

Figure 1

Research Design of the Study



Note. Developed by the author to illustrate the research methodology applied.

2.2 Research Hypotheses

H1: Social media marketing positively influences purchase intentions for organic food among consumers in the Kurdistan region.

H2: social media marketing positively impacts Sustainable consumption behavior among consumers for organic food in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

H3: Sustainable consumption behavior positively influences the purchase intentions of consumers for organic food in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

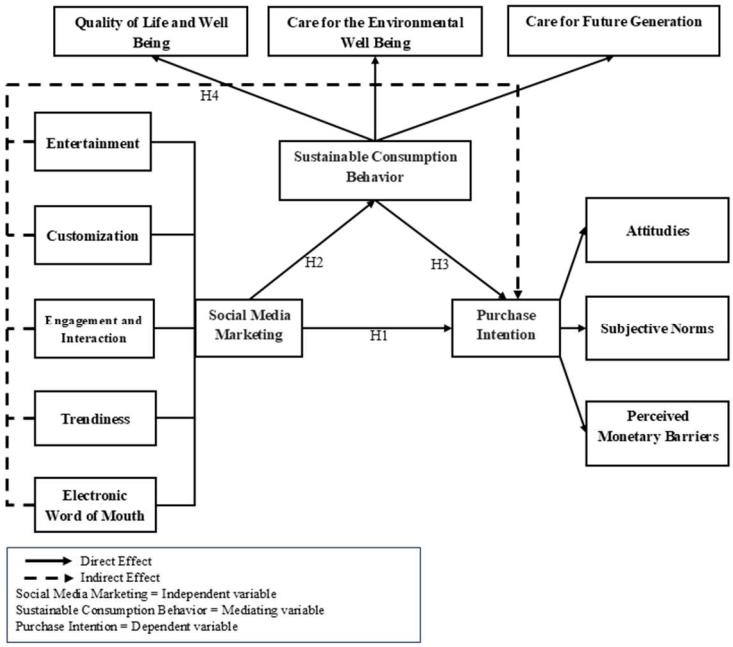
H4: Sustainable consumption behavior partially mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention for organic food in the Kurdistan region.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The mediating role of sustainable consumption behavior is supported by Ismael and Balogh (2023), who demonstrated that ethical, health, and environmental concerns strongly shape organic food purchasing decisions, making SCB a critical behavioral factor in consumer intention models. The following figure represents the conceptual framework based on the literature review.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework Based on Literature Review



Note. Developed by the author based on the reviewed literature.

2.4 Population and Sampling

The study targeted three distinct groups:

1. **Consumers:** Two focus groups were conducted with 12 participants in total (6 organic food consumers and 6 non-organic consumers).

2. **Influencers:** Six social media influencers operating in Kurdistan were interviewed. These influencers were chosen because of their active engagement in lifestyle, health, and food-related content.
3. **Producers:** Eleven organic food producers were interviewed to capture perspectives from the supply side, including challenges related to production, certification, and marketing.
4. **Survey respondents:** 565 respondents from the Kurdistan Region completed an online survey distributed via universities and social media. The purposive sample met and exceeded the minimum requirement for SEM analysis, ensuring statistical reliability.

2.5 Research Instruments

- **Qualitative instruments:**
- Semi-structured interview guides for influencers and producers
- Discussion prompts consumer focus groups.
- Questions explore topics such as trust in influencers, barriers to organic consumption, marketing effectiveness, consumer motivations, and perceptions of sustainability.
- **Quantitative instrument (Survey):**

A 44-item questionnaire developed from established scales in prior research (Cheung et al., 2020; Quoquab et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). The questionnaire covered:

- **Social Media Marketing dimensions:** Entertainment, Customization, Engagement & Interaction, Trendiness, and Electronic Word-of-Mouth.
- **Sustainable Consumption Behavior dimensions:** Quality of Life, Care for Environmental Well-being, Care for the Future Generations.
- **Purchase Intention dimensions:** Purchase Intention was operationalized within the extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework. Consistent with Ajzen (1991), the construct incorporated the core TPB components of Attitudes and Subjective Norms. In addition, Perceived Monetary Barriers were operationalized as a context-specific indicator of Perceived Behavioral Control, capturing affordability constraints relevant to the Kurdistan Region. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The instrument was pre-tested for clarity and contextual relevance and translated into Arabic to ensure accurate participant comprehension.

Table 1

Research instruments

Variables	Item code	Items	Literature source(s)
Social Media Marketing/ SMM Entertainment (E)	**E1**	Social media marketing makes it easier to obtain information about organic products.	**(Cheung et al, 2020)**
	E2	Social media content about organic products is entertaining and interesting.	
	E3	It is enjoyable to spend time on social media related to organic products.	
	E4	Gathering information about organic products through social media is fun.	
Customization (C)	**C1**	Social media allows access to customized information about organic products.	**(Cheung et al, 2020)**
	C2	Social media provides services tailored to my needs when searching for organic products.	
	C3	Social media platforms for organic products are accessible anytime, anywhere.	
	C4	Social media simplifies purchase decisions for organic products based on my needs.	
Engagement and Interaction (EI)	**EI1**	I engage in activities related to obtaining organic food products through social media platforms.	**(Bilgin Y. (2018)**
	EI2	Social media enhances my positive attitude toward purchasing organic products.	
	EI3	Social media allows me to engage in discussions and share opinions about buying organic products.	
	EI4	I share my experiences about purchasing organic products with others via social media.	
Trendiness (T)	**T1**	Social media content reflects the latest trends in organic products.	**(Cheung et al, 2020) and (Huyen et al, 2024)**
	T2	Using social media for organic products enhances a modern and innovative experience.	
	T3	Social media provides up-to-date information about organic products consistently.	
	T4	Social media helps me discover new organic products as they emerge.	
Electronic Word of Mouth (EWM)	**EWM1**	I share my opinions about organic products seen in social media ads with friends.	**(Cheung et al, 2020) and (Huyen, et al, 2024)**
	EWM2	I recommend others to try organic products promoted by social media influencers.	
	EWM3	I rely on recommendations from others via social media before deciding to purchase organic products.	
	EWM4	I share my personal experiences with organic products on social media to guide others.	

Sustainable Consumption Behavior/ SCB **Quality of life and well-being (QL)**	**QL1**	I try to make my purchases more organic.	**(Quoquab et al. 2019)**
	QL2	I am careful in my use of organic foods.	
	QL3	I always plan before purchasing any organic or non-organic product.	
	QL4	I practice saving and recycling organic products at home.	
Care for the environmental well-being (CE)	**CE1**	I care about the natural environment because I contribute to raising awareness about environmental issues and reducing waste.	**(Dimitrova, et al, 2022)**
	CE2	I use environmentally friendly products.	
	CE3	I pay extra money to purchase organic food or environmentally friendly products.	
	CE4	I am concerned about the depletion of natural resources.	
Care for the future generation (CFG)	**CFG1**	I care for the needs' fulfilment of the next generation.	**(Dimitrova, et al, 2022)**
	CFG2	I often think about the quality of life for future generations.	
	CFG3	I strive to reduce excessive consumption to preserve environmental resources for future generations.	
	CFG4	I believe my current consumption decisions significantly impact the future of upcoming generations.	
Purchase Intensions/ PI **Attitudes (A)**	**AT1**	Purchasing organic foods instead of conventional ones is beneficial for health.	**(Curvelo, et al, 2019)** **(Nguyen, et al, 2021)**
	AT2	Choosing organic foods over conventional ones is a rational decision.	
	AT3	Buying organic foods instead of conventional ones satisfies me more.	
	AT4	Purchasing organic foods reflects my commitment to sustainable choices and healthy practices.	
Subjective Norms (SN)	**SN1**	I value people's opinions regarding the purchase of organic products.	**(Nguyen, et al, 2021)**
	SN2	I respect the opinions of groups that advise me to buy organic products.	
	SN3	I buy organic products to avoid criticism from others.	
	SN4	People close to me encourage me to buy organic products.	
Perceived Monetary Barriers (PMB)	**PMB1**	The prices of organic food are relatively higher compared to conventional food.	**(Nguyen, et al, 2021)**
	PMB2	I prefer to buy organic products for my health, despite their higher cost.	
	PMB3	I feel there is a lack of availability of organic products.	
	PMB4	I find it challenging to locate organic products while shopping.	

Note. This table presents the measurement items and corresponding sources for each variable used in the study. Items were adapted from prior studies, including Cheung et al. (2020); Bilgin (2018); Quoquab et al. (2019); Dimitrova et al. (2022); Curvelo et al. (2019); Nguyen et al. (2021); and Huyen et al. (2024).

2.6 Data Analysis Techniques

- **Qualitative data analysis:** Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti and Voyant Tools. Codes and themes were generated iteratively, focusing on recurring concepts such as trust, authenticity, health, barriers, and the role of influencers. Word clouds and trend visualizations were created to illustrate dominant ideas.
- **Quantitative data analysis:**
- Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and general perceptions.
- Reliability and validity tests were conducted (Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, AVE, KMO, Bartlett's test).
- Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS was used to test hypotheses, analyze path coefficients, and confirm mediation effects.
- Inferential statistics (t-tests, ANOVA) were also used to explore demographic differences in perceptions and behaviors.

3. Main Findings of the Dissertation

This chapter presents the empirical results of the dissertation, derived from both qualitative and quantitative methods. The purpose of integrating two approaches was to ensure that the complexity of consumer behavior in the Kurdistan Region regarding organic food could be examined holistically. Qualitative results provide depth and context, capturing perspectives from influencers, producers, and consumers, while the quantitative results provide breadth and generalizability, based on responses from 565 participants analyzed with structural equation modeling.

Section 1: Qualitative Analysis

3.1.1 Thematic Analysis: Social Media Influencers

Semi-structured interviews with six influencers revealed several consistent themes:

1. **Trust and Authenticity as Key Drivers**: Influencers emphasized that their audiences placed high value on authenticity. When influencers personally used organic products and shared their experiences transparently, their recommendations were more likely to drive

purchase intentions. One influencer stated: *"When I promote an organic product, my followers trust my words. Many of them end up buying it even without other forms of confirmation."*

2. **Educational Role of Influencers:** Beyond promotional content, educational posts about health benefits, environmental sustainability, and ethical consumption were found to be more effective in shaping long-term consumer attitudes. Also, influencers who combined promotion with educational narratives had higher engagement rates.

3. **Barriers Faced by Influencers**: Influencers highlighted difficulties due to the absence of certification systems in Kurdistan. Many consumers expressed skepticism about whether products marketed as organic were truly organic. Another barrier was price sensitivity. Influencers admitted that while they could generate awareness, the higher price of organic products often discouraged actual purchases.

4. **Impact of Trendiness and Virality:** Several influencers explained that trending content (e.g., viral recipes, influencer collaborations) often triggered immediate spikes in sales of organic products. However, these effects were sometimes short-lived unless supported by authenticity and educational campaigns.

Table 2

Demographic Information on Influencers on Social Media

Influencer's Demographic Information			
Influencers	**Gender**	**Most Use Platforms**	**Sector**
Influencer A	Female	Instagram and snapchat	Doctor
Influencer B	Female	Instagram and snapchat	Nutritionist
Influencer C	Female	Instagram and snapchat	Entrepreneur
Influencer D	Male	Instagram, snapchat and YouTube	Businessman
Influencer E	Male	Instagram	Pharmacist
Influencer F	Male	Instagram, snapchat and YouTube	Businessman

Note. Data collected by the author through interviews (2024).

3.1.2 Thematic Analysis: Organic Food Producers

Interviews with eleven organic food producers revealed key insights:

1. **Challenges in Supply and Certification**: Producers stressed the lack of regulatory frameworks for organic certification in the Kurdistan Region, which hindered market growth and consumer trust. Production costs remained high due to small-scale operations and reliance on imported seeds or fertilizers.
2. **Social media as a Double-Edged Sword**: While producers acknowledged the potential of social media marketing, they noted that misinformation and unverified claims by competitors sometimes created confusion among consumers. Many producers relied on influencers as a bridge to consumers, given their own limited digital marketing expertise.
3. **Consumer Segmentation**: Producers identified two major consumer segments: health-conscious individuals who consistently purchased organic products, and price-sensitive consumers who were interested but reluctant to pay premium prices.

Table 3

Demographic Information of Producers

Producer's Demographic Information			
Producers	**Gender**	**Experience (years)**	**Sector**
Producer A	Female	3 years	Organic Food+ Sweets
Producer B	Male	3 years	Organic Juices
Producer C	Male	7 years	Organic Olive Oil
Producer D	Male	2 years	Organic Tomato Paste
Producer E	Male	45 years	Organic Meat
Producer F	Male	8 Years	Organic Ice Cream
Producer G	Male	8 years	Organic Rice
Producer H	Male	30 years	Organic Sesame Paste
Producer I	Male	37 years	Organic Spice
Producer J	Male	5 years	Organic Oil
Producer K	Male	1 year	Organic Pomegranate Molasses and Organic Apple Vinegar

Note. Data collected by the author through interviews (2024).

3.1.3 Thematic Analysis: Consumer Focus Groups

Two focus groups (one with organic food consumers, one with non-organic consumers) provided additional perspectives:

1. **Organic Consumers (Focus Group A)**: These participants expressed strong interest in organic products due to health concerns, environmental awareness, and care for future generations. They highlighted social media as their main source of information, particularly through influencer recommendations and eWOM (reviews, comments, shared posts). However, they raised concerns about product authenticity, expressing doubts about whether products labeled "organic" truly met international standards.
2. **Non-Organic Consumers (Focus Group B):** These participants cited price and availability as the main barriers preventing them from purchasing organic products. They also expressed skepticism about whether organic products were significantly better than conventional alternatives. Interestingly, several participants admitted that influencer promotions captured their attention, but they rarely translated into purchase due to cost barriers.

Table 4

Demographic Information of Customer's Focus Group

Customer's Focus Group Demographic Information						
Customer	**Gender**	**Age**	**Organic**	**Non-Organic**	**Interview Date**	**Interview Duration**
Customer A1	Male	37	✓		19/07/2024	69 Minutes
Customer A2	Male	39	✓			
Customer A3	Male	30	✓			
Customer A4	Female	37	✓			
Customer A5	Female	27	✓			
Customer A6	Female	49	✓			
Customer B1	Female	33		✓	19/07/2024	73 Minutes
Customer B2	Female	30		✓		
Customer B3	Female	31		✓		
Customer B4	Male	39		✓		
Customer B5	Male	21		✓		
Customer B6	Female	25		✓		

Note. Data collected by the author through focus group interviews (2024).

3.1.4 Summary of Qualitative Findings

The qualitative component of the study, which included semi-structured interviews with six social media influencers, eleven organic food producers, and two consumer focus groups (six organic and six non-organic participants), provided valuable insights into the dynamics shaping organic food consumption in the Kurdistan Region.

1. Social Media Influencers: Interviews with influencers revealed that trust and authenticity are fundamental to shaping purchase intentions. Audiences were more likely to act on recommendations when influencers personally used organic products and shared genuine experiences. Influencers highlighted their educational role, noting that content focused on health, sustainability, and ethical consumption generated deeper engagement than purely promotional posts. However, they also reported barriers, including the absence of certification systems, consumer skepticism, and price sensitivity. While trending and viral content could temporarily boost sales, long-term impact required consistent authenticity and education.

2. Organic Food Producers: Producers emphasized structural challenges, including high production costs, reliance on imports, and the absence of regulatory frameworks for organic certification, which undermines consumer trust. While they recognized the potential of social media as a marketing tool, they also noted risks from misinformation and unverified claims. Producers identified two key consumer segments: health-conscious adopters who purchase organic food despite higher prices, and price-sensitive consumers who express interest but refrain from purchasing. Transparency in supply chains and greater use of influencer partnerships were seen as critical to building trust.

3. Consumer Focus Groups: Organic consumers reported strong motivations linked to health, environmental awareness, and intergenerational responsibility. They identified social media and eWOM (reviews, comments, shared posts) as their primary information sources but expressed ongoing concerns about authenticity due to weak certification. In contrast, non-organic consumers cited price and availability as their main barriers, alongside skepticism about whether organic food provided significant advantages over conventional products. Although influencer promotions often captured their attention, these rarely translated into purchases due to affordability constraints.

Section 2: Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative phase surveyed 565 respondents from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Data was analyzed using SPSS and Smart PLS to test the hypothesized relationships.

3.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey was conducted with 565 respondents from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The demographic profile indicates that the sample was diverse in terms of gender, age, education, income, and residence. A slight majority were male (55.8%), while females accounted for 44.2%. In terms of age, most respondents were between 30–40 years (36.5%), followed by those under 30 (30.4%), and a smaller proportion above 50 years (8.1%). The educational background was relatively high, with 52% holding postgraduate degrees and 38.9% holding bachelor's degrees. Income levels showed variation, with one-third earning less than $500, 30.3% earning between $500–999, and 14.3% earning more than $1500 per month. The majority of participants (89%) resided in urban areas, reflecting the digital and consumer dynamics of city-based populations.

Table 5

Demographic information of respondents

Variables	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	315	55.8
	Female	250	44.2
	Total	565	100
Age	Less than 30 years	172	30.4
	30-40 years	206	36.5
	41-50 years	141	25
	More than 50	46	8.1
	Total	565	100
Education Level	Technical Education or below	51	9
	Bachelor	220	38.9
	Postgraduate	294	52
	Total	565	100
Income	Less than 500$	181	32
	500-999$	171	30.3
	1000-1500$	132	23.4
	More than 1500$	81	14.3
	Total	565	100
Residence	Urban	503	89
	Rural	62	11
	Total	565	100

Note. This table presents the demographic profile of the survey respondents, including gender, age, education level, income, and place of residence. Data collected by the author (2024).

Social Media Marketing Dimensions

Analysis of the five dimensions of social media marketing (SMM) revealed overall positive perceptions. Respondents generally agreed with the role of entertainment (M = 3.55, SD = 1.10), customization (M = 3.57, SD = 1.09), engagement and interaction (M = 3.41, SD = 1.12), trendiness (M = 3.69, SD = 1.05), and electronic word of mouth (M = 3.34, SD = 1.18). Among these, trendiness scored highest, with 63.9% agreement, particularly in discovering new organic products (T4, M = 3.84). By contrast, electronic word of mouth received the lowest level of agreement, with 50.4% endorsing reliance on peer recommendations (EWM3, M = 3.40). These results suggest that consumers value SMM strategies that are trendy and engaging, but they remain cautious about peer-generated endorsements.

Sustainable Consumption Behavior

The dimensions of sustainable consumption behavior (SCB) were measured through quality of life (QL), care for the environment (CE), and concern for future generations (CFG). Overall agreement was strong, with 58.3% supporting QL behaviors (M = 3.57, SD = 1.09), 68.5% endorsing environmental care (M = 3.87, SD = 1.09), and 68% emphasizing responsibility for future generations (M = 3.84, SD = 1.09). The highest means was recorded for environmental care (CE4, M = 4.04), reflecting strong concern about resource depletion. Lower scores were found in QL4 (M = 3.26), suggesting limited practices of recycling and saving. These results highlight that while respondents value sustainability conceptually, behavioral practices like recycling remain less consistent.

Purchase Intention Dimensions

Purchase intention (PI) was assessed through attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived monetary barriers. Respondents showed very positive attitudes toward organic food (M = 3.92, SD = 1.09), with 74.4% agreeing that organic food is beneficial for health (A1, M = 3.97). Subjective norms were weaker (M = 3.36, SD = 1.18), with only 51.7% agreeing that social influence encouraged their purchasing, indicating a gap between personal preference and social pressure. Perceived monetary barriers were significant, with 67.5% acknowledging that high prices discouraged purchase (PMB1, M = 3.91). These findings suggest that although consumers are positively

predisposed toward organic food, affordability and limited social encouragement constrain actual purchasing behavior.

3.2.2 Measurement and Structural Models

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the measurement model and determine the reliability and validity of the constructs used in this research. Following established guidelines, convergent validity was evaluated via item loadings (≥ 0.60), Average Variance Extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50), and Composite Reliability (CR ≥ 0.70) (Hair et al., 2021). Table 6 shows that most loadings exceeded 0.60, with many above 0.70. One item (SN3) loaded at 0.586 but was retained given its theoretical relevance and the overall robustness of the construct's reliability. All constructs exhibited AVE values above 0.50 and CR values above 0.70, confirming convergent validity and internal consistency (Hair et al., 2021). Specifically, SMM (CR = 0.957, AVE = 0.545, α = 0.956), SCB (CR = 0.943, AVE = 0.617, α = 0.943), and PI (CR = 0.925, AVE = 0.541, α = 0.922) all demonstrated strong reliability

Discriminant validity was confirmed using both the Fornell Larcker criterion (Table 7), whereby the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and the HTMT ratio (Table 8), with all values below the conservative 0.85 threshold (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Collinearity diagnostics (Table 9) indicated no multicollinearity, with VIF values ranging from 1.000 to 1.389 well within recommended limits (Hair et al., 2021). Finally, Figure 3 illustrates the PLS-SEM measurement model, showing that all factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .05$) and exceeded the acceptable 0.60 threshold, reinforcing convergent validity. Together, these results establish a reliable and valid measurement model, providing a solid basis for structural analysis and hypothesis testing.

Table 6

Measurement Model Results: Factor Loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Cronbach's Alpha

Variables	Sub-Construct	Item	Loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Marketing	E	E1	0.771	0.957	0.545	0.956
		E2	0.780			
		E3	0.762			
		E4	0.794			
	C	C1	0.773			

		C2	0.777			
		C3	0.756			
		C4	0.771			
	EI	EI1	0.777			
		EI2	0.764			
		EI3	0.754			
		EI4	0.762			
	T	T1	0.698			
		T2	0.713			
		T3	0.727			
		T4	0.723			
	EWM	EWM1	0.673			
		EWM2	0.687			
		EWM3	0.651			
		EWM4	0.616			
Sustainable Consumption Behavior	QL	QL1	0.700	0.943	0.617	0.943
		QL2	0.745			
		QL3	0.720			
		QL4	0.745			
	CE	CE1	0.838			
		CE2	0.813			
		CE3	0.833			
		CE4	0.831			
	CFG	CFG1	0.791			
		CFG2	0.789			
		CFG3	0.811			
		CFG4	0.794			
Purchase Intention	A	AT1	0.777	0.925	0.541	0.922
		AT2	0.792			
		AT3	0.797			
		AT4	0.797			
	SN	SN1	0.729			
		SN2	0.775			
		SN3	0.586			
		SN4	0.707			
	PMB	PMB1	0.682			
		PMB2	0.755			
		PMB3	0.720			
		PMB4	0.681			

Table 7

Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

	SMM	SCB	PI
SMM	0.738		
SCB	0.529	0.785	
PI	0.578	0.700	0.736

Table 8

Discriminant Validity Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio

	PI	SMM	SCB
PI	-		
SMM	0.613	-	
SCB	0.750	0.557	-

Table 9

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Values for Constructs

Variables	SMM	SCB	PI
SMM			1.389
SCB	1.000		
PI		1.389	

Table 10

Predictive relevance of the path model

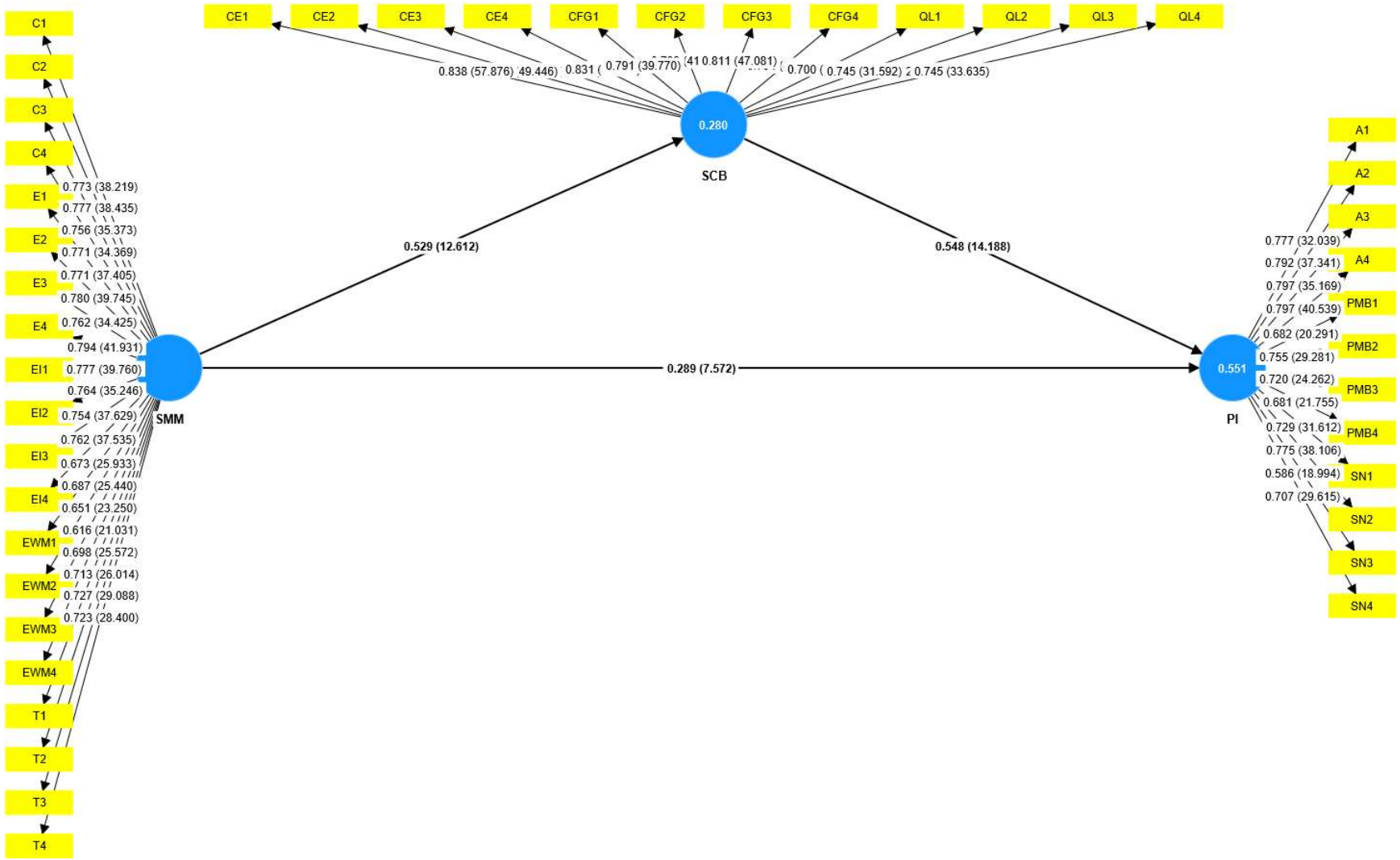
Dependent Variables	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Q^2 Values
PI	0.551	0.549	0.293
SCB	0.280	0.279	0.169

Note. This table presents the coefficient of determination (R²), adjusted R², and Stone-Geisser's Q² values for the endogenous constructs in the structural model. Q² values greater than 0 indicate predictive relevance. PI = Purchase Intention; SCB = Sustainable Consumption Behavior. Results based on the author's own data analysis (2024).

Table 10 illustrates the predictive relevance and explanatory capacity of the structural model. The R^2 score for Purchase Intention (PI) is 0.551, indicating substantial explanatory power, while Sustainable Consumption Behavior (SCB) exhibits an R^2 of 0.280, reflecting moderate explanatory capacity. The Q^2 values obtained through blindfolding cross-validated redundancy are 0.293 for PI and 0.169 for SCB, demonstrating adequate predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2021). Discriminant validity was rigorously assessed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The square roots of AVE exceeded inter-construct correlations, and all HTMT values remained below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming construct distinctiveness. Variance inflation factors (VIF) indicated no multicollinearity concerns, further supporting structural stability and model robustness.

Figure 3

Structural Model with Path Coefficients and t-values



3.2.3 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Findings:

- Direct Effects

Table 11

Hypothesis Testing Results for Direct Effects

Hypotheses	Paths	Original sample (O)	Sample means (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values	Decisions
H1	SMM □ PI	0.289	0.288	0.038	7.572	0.000	Significant
H2	SMM □ SCB	0.529	0.531	0.042	12.612	0.000	Significant
H3	SCB□ PI	0.548	0.548	0.039	14.188	0.000	Significant

As shown in Table 11 all three direct hypotheses (H1–H3) were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming robust associations among the constructs:

- **H1 (SMM → PI):** Social Media Marketing ($\beta = 0.289$, $t = 7.572$, $p < 0.001$) has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention. This indicates that consumers exposed to engaging social media marketing are more inclined to purchase organic food.
- **H2 (SMM → SCB):** SMM also positively influences Sustainable Consumption Behavior ($\beta = 0.529$, $t = 12.612$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that active engagement with social media campaigns fosters environmentally responsible consumer practices.
- **H3 (SCB → PI):** SCB strongly predicts Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.548$, $t = 14.188$, $p < 0.001$). Consumers who adopt sustainable behaviors demonstrate a stronger intention to purchase organic and eco-friendly products.

  All three direct paths were positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming that SMM directly influences both SCB and PI, and that SCB strongly predicts PI.

- **Indirect Effects**

Table 12

Hypotheses Testing for Indirect Effects

Hypoth-eses	Paths	Original sample (O)	Sample means (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values	Decisions
H4	SMM □ PI	0.290	0.291	0.032	8.990	0.000	Significant

The mediation hypothesis (H4) was supported as shown in Table 12. Social Media Marketing (SMM) exerted a significant indirect effect on Purchase Intention (PI) through Sustainable Consumption Behavior (SCB) ($\beta = 0.290$, $t = 8.990$, $p < 0.001$). Because the direct SMM → PI path remained statistically significant alongside the indirect effect, the results indicate complementary partial mediation rather than full mediation.

Together, these findings position SCB as a central mediating mechanism linking digital marketing stimuli to purchase intention within the organic food context.

3.2.4 Summary of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis, based on responses from 565 participants in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, provides robust support for the proposed research model. Descriptive results showed favorable perceptions of social media marketing (highest for trendiness, lowest for electronic word of mouth), strong endorsement of sustainable consumption behaviors (particularly environmental care and responsibility for future generations), and positive attitudes toward organic food, although constrained by high prices and limited social encouragement.

The measurement model demonstrated strong reliability and validity, with all CR values exceeding 0.90, AVEs above 0.50, and Cronbach's alpha above 0.90. Discriminant validity was confirmed through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios, and multicollinearity was ruled out with low VIF values.

Structural model testing confirmed all direct hypotheses: Social Media Marketing (SMM) positively influenced both Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$) and Sustainable Consumption Behavior ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < 0.001$), while SCB emerged as a strong predictor of Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.548$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis further revealed that SCB partially mediated the relationship between SMM and PI ($\beta = 0.290$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring its central role in connecting digital marketing strategies to consumer intentions.

In terms of explanatory and predictive power, the model accounted for 55.1% of the variance in Purchase Intention ($R^2 = 0.551$) and 28% of the variance in Sustainable Consumption Behavior ($R^2 = 0.280$), representing substantial and moderate explanatory capacity, respectively. The Q^2 values obtained through blindfolding were 0.293 for PI and 0.169 for SCB, both exceeding zero, which confirms moderate predictive relevance.

These findings empirically support the extended TPB framework by demonstrating that digitally mediated stimuli influence intention both directly and through sustainability-oriented behavioral values.

Section 3: Integrated Discussion: Triangulation of Qualitative and Quantitative Results

The integrated findings demonstrate strong convergence between the qualitative narratives and the structural relationships identified in the PLS-SEM model.

First, the significant positive effect of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on Purchase Intention (PI) is reinforced by qualitative evidence highlighting trust-building and normative influence. Influencers, producers, and consumers consistently emphasized credibility, certification transparency, and alignment with health and sustainability values. These findings explain why SMM directly influences PI, primarily through strengthening attitudes and subjective norms, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

Second, lack of awareness emerged as a central contextual factor shaping consumer behavior. Many participants reported misunderstanding the concept of “organic” or expressing skepticism toward certification claims. Consequently, social media functions not only as a promotional channel but as an educational platform. Evidence-based content, health comparisons, and certification visibility were perceived as more effective than simple advertising. This clarifies the SMM → PI relationship as partially driven by awareness-induced attitude formation.

Third, the mediating role of Sustainable Consumption Behavior (SCB) is supported by qualitative insights emphasizing health consciousness, environmental responsibility, and ethical

consumption. Organic food purchasing was frequently framed as part of a broader lifestyle orientation rather than an isolated transaction. These narratives substantiate the complementary partial mediation identified quantitatively: SMM strengthens sustainability-oriented values, which in turn enhance purchase intention. SCB therefore operates as a value-based bridge linking digital engagement to behavioral intention.

Fourth, structural barriers such as high price, limited availability, and weak certification systems illuminate the role of perceived behavioral control within the extended TPB framework. Even consumers with favorable attitudes acknowledged constraints related to accessibility and affordability. These market conditions moderate the translation of motivation into consistent purchasing behavior.

Overall, triangulation enhances internal validity by demonstrating alignment between statistical paths and lived experiences. The findings show that in the Kurdistan Region, social media marketing influences purchase intention not merely through exposure, but through trust formation, awareness development, value internalization, and interaction with structural market realities.

4. New and Novel Results of the Dissertation

The dissertation generates several new insights that add to the frame of knowledge on social media marketing, sustainable consumption, and consumer behavior in emerging economies.

4.1 Integration of Social Media Marketing and Sustainable Consumption Behavior

A major novelty of this dissertation lies in integrating the five dimensions of Social Media Marketing (Entertainment, Customization, Engagement & Interaction, Trendiness, and eWOM) with Sustainable Consumption Behavior (SCB) as a mediating construct. The PLS-SEM analysis confirmed that SMM strongly influences SCB ($\beta = 0.529$, $t = 12.612$, $p < 0.001$) and that SCB significantly predicts Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.548$, $t = 14.188$, $p < 0.001$). Bootstrapping results confirm a statistically significant complementary partial mediation effect ($\beta = 0.290$, $t = 8.990$, $p < 0.001$), as the direct SMM → PI path remained significant alongside the indirect effect.

4.2 Empirical Model with Strong Predictive Validity

The validated model exhibits high explanatory and predictive power, explaining more than half of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.551$; $Q^2 = 0.293$) and nearly one third in sustainable consumption behavior ($R^2 = 0.280$; $Q^2 = 0.169$). All constructs achieved strong reliability and

convergent validity (CR > 0.90; AVE > 0.50; Cronbach's α > 0.92). These outcomes confirm the robustness of the measurement model and emphasize that digital marketing strategies grounded in social media interaction can predict sustainability-oriented consumer behavior with substantial accuracy in emerging markets.

4.3 Contextual Novelty in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

This dissertation represents the first comprehensive empirical study linking social media marketing to purchase intention for organic food within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Results from 565 respondents reveal that SMM directly predicts purchase intention ($\beta = 0.289$, $t = 7.572$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly influences it through SCB. Qualitative focus group findings confirmed that influencer credibility and social media awareness increased trust and knowledge about organic food, even in a context characterized by weak certification frameworks and limited institutional support. The findings suggest that digital platforms partially mitigate informational and trust-related barriers, although structural constraints remain influential.

4.4 Extended TPB Framework in Digital and Sustainable Consumption Contexts

Building on the explanatory strengths of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the present dissertation adopts an extended TPB framework to better capture consumer behavior within digitally mediated environments. Specifically, social media marketing is introduced as an external antecedent influencing both sustainable consumption behavior and purchase intention, while sustainable consumption behavior functions as a mediating construct linking digital marketing stimuli to intention formation. SCB operates as a complementary partial mediator, interacting with rather than replacing the cognitive determinants of TPB (attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control) in shaping purchase intention. This extension enables the model to preserve the core cognitive determinants of TPB while systematically incorporating digitally mediated external influences, thereby enhancing its contextual relevance and explanatory adequacy within emerging market environments.

4.5 Discovery of Distinct Consumer Segments

Qualitative and cluster-based quantitative analyses revealed two major consumer segments in Kurdistan. The *Health and Environment Oriented Adopters* (Cluster 1) display high engagement (SMME_F = 0.589; SMMEI_F = 0.595) and strong pro-environmental behavior (SCBCE_F =

15.197, p = 0.000). The *Price Sensitive Skeptics* (Cluster 3) show negative engagement (SMME_F = –1.269) and weak sustainability orientation (SCBCFG_F = –1.574, p = 0.000). This segmentation absent in prior research offers a practical framework for designing differentiated marketing strategies: educational and trust building campaigns for skeptics and loyalty programs for committed adopters. This segmentation advances prior to TPB-based research by incorporating market heterogeneity within emerging economies.

5. Practical recommendations

The findings provide actionable implications for policymakers and organic food producers seeking to strengthen sustainable consumption and digital market development in the Kurdistan Region.

At the policy level, establishing a transparent and credible certification framework is essential. A dedicated regulatory body overseeing organic standards, labeling, and compliance would reduce consumer skepticism and protect legitimate producers. Financial mechanisms such as targeted subsidies and tax incentives could help offset high production costs, addressing the significant price barrier identified in the empirical analysis. Public awareness campaigns delivered through social media in collaboration with trusted influencers would enhance consumer education, particularly among digitally active younger segments. Integrating sustainability education into school and university curricula would further institutionalize pro-environmental attitudes.

At the business level, producers should prioritize structured, engagement-driven social media strategies rather than one-way promotional advertising. Interactive formats such as storytelling, live sessions, Q&A forums, and user-generated content strengthen consumer trust and purchase intention. Long-term partnerships with credible influencers should emphasize authenticity and educational value rather than short-term promotional exposure. Greater transparency in sourcing and production processes can further reduce trust deficits. Marketing strategies should also be adapted to the two consumer segments identified in this study: sustainability-oriented adopters and price-sensitive skeptics. Finally, expanding distribution networks through supermarkets, specialty stores, and online platforms would reduce availability constraints and enhance market penetration.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this research makes significant theoretical and practical contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study adopts a cross-sectional design. Although PLS-SEM enables the estimation of complex structural relationships, causal inferences between social media marketing, sustainable consumption behavior, and purchase intention remain theoretically grounded but not temporally confirmed. Longitudinal designs would strengthen causal interpretation.

Second, the research was conducted within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, focusing primarily on three major cities. Regional socioeconomic conditions and market maturity may limit the generalizability of findings to rural areas or other emerging economies with different institutional environments.

Third, organic food was examined as a general product category rather than disaggregated into specific product types (e.g., meat, dairy, vegetables). This aggregation may mask product-level variations in purchasing behavior.

Fourth, although the quantitative sample size was robust (n = 565), purposive sampling may restrict full representativeness of the broader population. In addition, self-reported survey measures may be influenced by social desirability bias.

Finally, the study focuses on purchase intention rather than observed purchasing behavior. Actual market behavior may differ due to financial constraints, product availability, or contextual influences.

In conclusion, this dissertation extends the Theory of Planned Behavior by incorporating digitally mediated external influences and sustainability-oriented value formation within the study of organic food consumption. The study provides one of the first empirically validated models explaining how digital engagement fosters pro-environmental purchase intention in an emerging market context. The findings offer evidence-based guidance for policymakers and producers seeking to strengthen organic food markets in the Kurdistan Region.

7. Future Research Directions

Building on the validated SMM → SCB → PI framework, future research should extend the geographic scope beyond the Kurdistan Region to multi-site and cross-country comparative studies within emerging and transitional economies. Establishing measurement invariance across cultural contexts would enhance the generalizability and theoretical transferability of the extended TPB model. To address the limitations of cross-sectional inference, longitudinal research designs are strongly recommended. Approaches such as cross-lagged panel modeling or latent growth modeling would allow examination of the temporal sequencing and durability of social media marketing effects on sustainable consumption behavior and purchase intention. Such designs would provide stronger causal validation of digitally mediated behavioral transformation. From a theoretical perspective, future studies may integrate complementary frameworks, such as the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) model, or Environmental Identity theory, to further explain sustainability-oriented intention formation. Additionally, explicitly modeling perceived behavioral control and price barriers as moderators would allow examination of moderated mediation mechanisms suggested by the present findings. Methodologically, experimental and quasi-experimental designs could compare the effectiveness of macro versus micro influencers, educational versus entertainment-based content, and transparency mechanisms such as certification badges, QR traceability systems, or farm-to-fork digital storytelling. Incorporating behavioral performance indicators (e.g., click-through rates, conversion metrics, or observed purchasing data) would strengthen external validity beyond self-reported intention measures. Finally, future research should refine segmentation approaches using multigroup SEM analysis, product-specific modeling (e.g., dairy versus meat versus produce), and robustness diagnostics such as common method bias testing and endogeneity controls. Such advancements would enhance both methodological rigor and practical applicability in sustainability-driven digital marketing research.

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Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Awaz Shukri Ismael
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Management and Business
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List of publications related to the dissertation

Articles, studies (4)

1. **Ismael, A. S.**, Balogh, P.: Attitudes and Subjective Norms Predicting Perceived Behavioral Control of Food Waste Reduction: Evidence from the Kurdistan Region Using the Theory of Planned Behavior.
Agrárinformatika/Journal of Agricultural Informatics. 17 (1), 101-116, 2026. ISSN: 2061-862X.
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2. **Ismael, A. S.**, Amin, M. B., Ali, M. J., Hajdu, Z., Balogh, P.: Relationship between social media marketing and young customers' purchase intention towards online shopping.
Cogent Social Sciences. 11 (1), 1-16, 2025. ISSN: 2331-1886.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2459881
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3. **Ismael, A. S.**, Balogh, P.: Exploring the nexus between sustainable consumption behavior and organic food purchase.
Apstract. 17 (2), 1-18, 2023. ISSN: 1789-221X.
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4. **Ismael, A. S.**, Balogh, P.: The Importance of Training and Development Programs in Promoting Sustainable Consumption Behavior: An HRM Perspective.
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List of other publications

Articles, studies (1)

5. **Ismael, A. S.**, Haji, B. S.: The Role of the Innovative Marketin in Achieving Marketing Excellence, An Eploratory Study of the Opinions of a Sample of Employees in Government Banks in Duhok City.
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Conference presentations (1)

6. **Ismael, A. S.**: The Role of Sustainable Consumption Behavior on Purchasing Organic Food.
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Conference Proceeding

Awaz Shukri Ismael. (2023, March 30-31). *The Role of Sustainable Consumption Behavior on Purchasing Organic Food*. New Trends and Challenges in Management Conference. University of Debrecen, Hungary.

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