FROM CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS TO RESILIENT CITIZENS: THE ROLE OF ESG PERCEPTION IN SHAPING SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN GREECE

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Abstract
This study investigates how Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) perceptions influence sustainable behavior and the emergence of the "resilient citizen" in the region of Attica, Greece. It highlights a shift in urban resilience from infrastructure-centric models to citizen-centered approaches, where individuals transition from passive consumers to active participants in sustainability. Based on a quantitative survey of 1,020 residents, the study identifies a distinct "value-action gap". Although citizens acknowledge the importance of sustainability, financial constraints driven by prolonged economic instability and inflation severely restrict their ability to adopt sustainable practices, especially among lower-income groups. Consequently, citizen resilience depends heavily on material and structural conditions rather than environmental awareness alone. Furthermore, trust is established as a critical prerequisite for engagement. Corporate greenwashing and inconsistent practices generate skepticism, leading to public disengagement. An "information gap" was also identified, as nearly half of the highly educated sample was unfamiliar with ESG terminology. Finally, demographics play a key role: women show higher sensitivity to social criteria, while higher education is positively associated with greater demands for corporate transparency and ethical governance. In conclusion, enhancing urban resilience in Greece requires holistic policies that bridge economic inequalities and restore trust through meaningful corporate accountability.

Keywords: ESG perceptions; urban resilience; resilient citizen; trust; value-action gap.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become a defining challenge for contemporary urban societies, where multiple socio-economic pressures -including economic insecurity, high levels of inequality, declining social trust, and social fragmentation [1]- highlight the urgent need for resilience at both systemic and individual levels. In urban environments particularly, resilience depends not only on institutional capacity but also on citizens' ability to adapt, participate, and respond actively to social and environmental change [2]. Within this context, an important question emerges: how can individuals evolve from passive consumers into resilient and engaged citizens?

A resilient citizen is not only environmentally aware but also capable of adapting, participating, and actively contributing to the sustainability and resilience of urban systems. This multidimensional role is becoming increasingly important for businesses as they continuously redefine their social and environmental responsibilities in response to evolving societal expectations [3]. Consequently, sustainability is no longer understood solely as a corporate obligation, but rather as a broader societal process requiring interaction among institutions, businesses, and citizens.

As businesses increasingly seek legitimacy through sustainability-oriented practices, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria have emerged as a visible framework through which citizens evaluate corporate responsibility, credibility, and commitment to sustainable development. Traditionally, ESG has been approached primarily from an investor-centric perspective, emphasizing financial performance, risk management, and corporate accountability. More recently, however, ESG has begun to influence everyday decision-making and public attitudes toward sustainability, reshaping the relationship among citizens, corporations, and governance institutions. In this respect, ESG perceptions may affect not only consumer preferences but also broader forms of civic engagement and sustainable behavioral intention.

Although ESG and urban resilience have been extensively studied as separate fields [4, 5, 6, 7], limited research has examined how ESG perceptions influence the transformation of individuals from passive consumers into resilient citizens, particularly under conditions of economic and institutional uncertainty. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the role of ESG perceptions in shaping sustainable behavior and citizen engagement. More specifically, it examines the relationship between ESG perception, trust, financial capacity, and sustainable behavioral intentions among residents of Attica, Greece.

In urban contexts, such as the metropolitan region of Attica, environmental pressures coexist with economic vulnerability, creating conditions in which sustainability transitions depend not only on institutional strategies but also on citizens' perceived capacity and willingness to participate. Within this context, ESG perceptions may function either as a catalyst for engagement or as a source of skepticism, depending on the level of trust and perceived credibility.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it advances the conceptual linkage between ESG perceptions and urban resilience by introducing the notion of the "resilient citizen" as a behavioral outcome associated with sustainability engagement. Second, it provides empirical evidence from a post-crisis European urban context, highlighting the role of financial and institutional constraints in shaping sustainability transitions. Third, it offers policy-relevant insights into how ESG credibility, governance perceptions, and economic constraints influence citizen participation in sustainable urban development.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 ESG awareness and consumer behavior

The increasing integration of ESG criteria into corporate strategy has significantly reshaped consumer behavior. Although ESG was initially developed as a framework for assessing corporate risk and long-term performance, it increasingly influences how individuals evaluate companies, products, and services in everyday decision-making. This shift reflects a broader transition from purely economic choices toward value-oriented consumption, where environmental, ethical, and social considerations play a more central role.

Despite growing sustainability awareness, a substantial body of literature highlights the persistence of the “value-action gap”, whereby pro-environmental attitudes do not consistently translate into sustainable behavior. Factors, such as high prices, limited availability of sustainable alternatives, and mistrust toward “green” products often weaken sustainability-oriented intentions [8, 9]. Within this context, trust emerges as a critical mechanism linking ESG perception with behavioral intention. When consumers perceive ESG claims as credible, they are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward firms and engage in supportive behaviors, including purchasing sustainable products and endorsing responsible brands. Green trust strengthens the relationship between sustainability communication and purchase intention [10], while brand attitude mediates the relationship between perceived ESG performance and low-carbon purchasing behavior [11]. Similarly, perceived trust and corporate social responsibility appear particularly influential among Generation Z consumers adopting sustainability-oriented services [12].

Conversely, the increasing prevalence of greenwashing has undermined trust in ESG communication [13]. Perceived inconsistencies between corporate claims and actual practices may generate skepticism, frustration, and disengagement. Empirical evidence suggests that such perceptions can lead to brand avoidance and negative word-of-mouth [14], indicating that trust is not merely a facilitating factor but a prerequisite for translating ESG perceptions into meaningful behavioral outcomes.

From an institutional perspective, ESG communication can also be interpreted through Signaling Theory. In conditions of information asymmetry, firms use ESG disclosures to signal their commitment to sustainability and ethical conduct. However, the effectiveness of these signals depends on their perceived credibility and the broader institutional context, including regulatory enforcement, transparency, and societal trust. In contexts characterized by weak institutional confidence, ESG signals may be discounted or interpreted with skepticism, thereby weakening their behavioral influence.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that ESG perceptions shape consumer behavior through a multidimensional process involving cognitive evaluation, relational trust, and structural feasibility. This mechanism provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the transition from the “conscious consumer” to the “resilient citizen”. Building on this framework, the present study examines how trust, financial capacity, and socio-economic conditions influence sustainability-oriented behavioral intentions and citizen engagement.

2.2 Urban resilience and citizen participation: Defining the “resilient citizen”

In contemporary sustainability discourse, resilience has evolved from a concept primarily associated with disaster response and recovery [15] -often conceptualized as a function of infrastructure, governance, or technological innovation- to a broader paradigm. Recent theoretical developments have expanded this perspective to include adaptive and transformative capacities, emphasizing not only recovery but also the ability of cities to evolve under conditions of long-term uncertainty. In environments increasingly characterized by disruption, this adaptive capacity becomes critical for both systems and individuals. As noted by Arvanitis et al. [6], community resilience refers to the capability of a community to resist and potentially thrive in a period of pressure, disturbance, or change through sustainable solutions and actions.

Within this framework, the role of citizens has become increasingly prominent. Resilience is now considered a socially embedded and co-produced process that depends on the active participation of individuals. Citizens are thus repositioned from passive recipients of policies to active agents -or “co-producers”- of resilience [16]. Through systematic participation processes, citizens provide knowledge, feedback and ideas, bridging the gap between technical solutions and societal needs.

This shift has contributed to the emergence of the concept of the “resilient citizen”, which extends beyond the traditional notion of the “conscious consumer”. While conscious consumers are primarily associated with ethical consumption and environmental awareness, resilient citizens are characterized by broader adaptive and participatory capacities. More specifically, resilient citizens are able to anticipate, respond to, and recover from environmental, economic, and social pressures while actively engaging in collective decision-making processes [17]. In this sense, resilience constitutes both an individual and a collective attribute, emerging through the interaction between personal agency and structural conditions.

The formation of the resilient citizen can therefore be understood as a multidimensional process influenced by behavioral, relational, and institutional factors. At the behavioral level, citizens require both the motivation and the capacity to adopt sustainability-oriented practices. At the relational level, trust plays a central role, as engagement is more likely when institutions and organizations are perceived as credible and accountable. At the institutional level, broader socio-economic conditions, including access to resources, regulatory structures, and market conditions, may either enable or constrain citizen participation in sustainability transitions.

Within this context, ESG criteria function as an important interface between corporations and society, signaling organizational commitment to environmental and social responsibility [18]. When perceived as credible, ESG signals can strengthen trust and encourage sustainability-oriented behavior. Conversely, inconsistent or misleading ESG practices may foster skepticism and disengagement, thereby weakening collective resilience.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in urban contexts characterized by economic vulnerability and institutional uncertainty, such as Athens. Existing evidence suggests that socio-economic inequalities, infrastructural limitations, and the long-term effects of economic crisis constrain citizens’ capacity to engage consistently in sustainable practices [19, 20]. Under such conditions, resilience depends not only on individual willingness [21] but also on supportive institutional frameworks and credible organizational practices [7]. Accordingly, the resilient citizen can be understood as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between individual agency, institutional trust, and structural conditions. By integrating ESG perceptions into this relationship, the present study develops a conceptual framework linking citizen engagement with urban resilience and sustainability-oriented behavior.

2.3 Research motivation, gap and objectives

The growing integration of ESG criteria into corporate strategy has increasingly influenced not only organizational practices but also public attitudes toward sustainability and responsible consumption. At the same time, urban resilience research has shifted toward more citizen-centered approaches, recognizing individuals as active participants in sustainability transitions rather than passive recipients of institutional policies.

Despite these developments, the relationship between ESG perceptions and the emergence of the "resilient citizen" remains underexplored, particularly in urban contexts characterized by economic uncertainty and institutional distrust. This gap is especially relevant in post-crisis economies such as Greece, where prolonged financial instability, rising living costs, and declining institutional trust may significantly affect citizens' willingness and ability to engage in sustainability-oriented practices.

The present study investigates how ESG perceptions shape sustainable behavioral intentions and contribute to resilient citizenship within the metropolitan region of Attica, Greece. More specifically, the study aims to:

(1) Examine the relationship between ESG perceptions and sustainable behavioral intentions.

(2) Investigate how trust and socio-economic conditions influence citizen engagement with sustainability-oriented practices.

(3) Contribute to the conceptual understanding of the "resilient citizen" within the context of sustainable urban development.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and sample

The study adopted a quantitative research approach to investigate the relationship between ESG perceptions, trust, and sustainability-oriented behavioral intentions among the residents of the Attica region, Greece. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire, following approaches adopted in similar ESG and consumer behavior studies [12, 14]. A non-probability convenience sampling approach was employed. The participants residing in the Attica region were invited to complete the questionnaire through digital distribution channels and social media platforms. A total of 1,020 valid responses were collected.

3.2 The questionnaire

A closed-type questionnaire was designed for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first section collected demographic information. In the second section, focused on the environmental dimension of ESG criteria, the respondents were asked to assess the importance of sustainability in their purchasing decisions, recycling behavior and corporate practices related to waste management, energy consumption, and climate change. The third section addressed the social dimension of ESG criteria, examining perceptions regarding working conditions, gender diversity in leadership positions, and employee health and safety policies. In the fourth section, aiming to capture the Governance dimension of ESG criteria, the respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of factors such as business ethics, transparency, and anti-corruption measures in decision-making, while exploring whether low levels of trust increase the demand for stricter corporate oversight. Finally, the fifth section included items measuring ESG awareness, perceived reliability of ESG-related information, attractiveness of sustainable products and services, and willingness to pay (WTP) a premium for sustainability-oriented products and services. The respondents' attitudes were measured using statements based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

3.3 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for calculating the means and standard deviations of continuous variables, as well as the frequencies and percentages of categorical variables. Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.693 to 0.926, indicating generally acceptable internal consistency [12, 14], with the Governance dimension showing a marginally lower value (Environmental Dimension=0.926, Social Dimension=0.754, Governance Dimension=0.693).

Given the nature of the Likert-scale data and the absence of a normal distribution, non-parametric statistical techniques were employed. Specifically, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was applied to assess associations between variables, while Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests were used to examine differences across demographic groups. The level of statistical significance (Sig.) was set at 0.05.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation provided a clearer interpretation of the factor structure. The rotated solution revealed two distinct factor groups (Table 1). For factor interpretation, only factor loadings greater than or equal to 0.30 after rotation were considered significant [12]. Factor loadings of the 11 variables after rotation in the two retained factors are shown in Table 1. The first factor included items related to environmental issues and was named "Environmental dimension". The second factor combined the Social and Governance dimensions into a broader construct, suggesting that the respondents perceive social responsibility and corporate governance as closely interconnected. This factor was named "Ethical Management".

Table 1. Principal Component Analysis results

Variable	F1	F2
Climate Change Mitigation	0.850	
Sustainable Energy Consumption	0.843	
Protection from Air Pollutants	0.831	
Sustainable Water Management	0.815	
Proper Waste Management	0.766	
Supplier Evaluation Criteria		0.797
Corporate Governance Practices		0.787
Employee Health & Safety		0.730
Social Criteria Integration		0.637
Sustainable Development Policies		0.559
Gender Diversity in Leadership		0.509

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic profile of the sample reveals a predominantly young and relatively educated population. Women represented 62.0% of the respondents, while individuals aged 18-25 accounted for 36.0% of the sample. Nearly half of the participants held a university or postgraduate degree. Despite this relatively high educational level, most respondents reported low annual income, with 77.6% earning below €18,000 per year.

The analysis indicated that many consumers remain hesitant (53.9%) or unwilling (18.5%) to pay additional costs for sustainable products. This finding reflects the persistence of the "value-action gap", suggesting that pro-environmental attitudes alone are insufficient to generate sustainable behavior when economic constraints limit consumers' purchasing capacity. This finding is particularly relevant in the Greek context, where prolonged economic instability, inflationary pressures, and rising energy costs continue to affect household disposable income. Consistent with previous studies on financial fragility and energy poverty [22, 23], the results indicate that sustainability-oriented choices are often perceived as economically inaccessible, especially among lower-income groups. This economic barrier is statistically confirmed by a Kruskal-Wallis test examining the effect of yearly income on consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) a premium for sustainable products. The analysis revealed significant differences across the WTP groups ($x^2(2) = 12.085$, $p = 0.002$), with the highest mean rank observed among those willing to pay (Mean Rank = 554.30), followed by the unwilling group (Mean Rank = 519.42) and the undecided participants (Mean Rank = 485.05). Consequently, resilience at the citizen level appears closely linked to material capacity and not solely to environmental awareness.

The analysis also revealed moderate levels of trust toward corporate ESG communication. While 49.1% of the respondents reported familiarity with the ESG concept, more than half of the sample considered ESG-related information provided by businesses to be only "moderately reliable". This finding reflects a broader climate of skepticism associated with concerns about greenwashing and the credibility of corporate sustainability claims [10, 14].

A statistically significant positive relationship emerged between trust in ESG information, and the importance attributed to governance criteria. Specifically, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient indicated a statistically significant, positive, and moderate relationship between trust in ESG information and the governance score ($r_s = 0.303$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that trust functions as a prerequisite for engagement rather than as a trigger for stricter monitoring. In other words, individuals who perceive ESG communication as credible are more likely to value transparency, accountability, and ethical governance practices, whereas skeptical citizens tend to disengage from ESG-related evaluation altogether. The findings therefore reinforce the importance of "green trust" as a central mechanism linking ESG perception to behavioral engagement.

They also revealed the existence of an important "information gap" as approximately half of the respondents were unfamiliar with the ESG concept despite the relatively high educational level of the sample. This indicates that ESG terminology and sustainability communication remain insufficiently integrated into public understanding. As supported by Ghasemi et al. [7], without clear knowledge, citizens cannot effectively pressure institutions to improve their governance and social practices.

Demographic variables also played an important role in shaping ESG perceptions. Female respondents assigned significantly greater importance to the social dimension of ESG compared to male respondents, a result consistent with previous research [24], linking women to stronger social sensitivity and greater concern for ethical and community-oriented issues. A Mann-Whitney U test confirmed these significant gender-based differences in the social dimension score ($U = 75{,}640.50$, $Z = -9.611$, $p < 0.001$). Female respondents demonstrated a substantially higher mean rank (570.82) compared to their male counterparts (Mean Rank = 389.75), reflecting a stronger social sensitivity.

Similarly, educational attainment was positively associated with the demand for corporate governance, transparency, and ethical leadership ($r_s = 0{,}123$, $p < 0.001$). The respondents holding university and postgraduate degrees demonstrated significantly higher governance scores compared to those with lower educational levels. This finding suggests that education enhances citizens' ability to critically evaluate ESG-related information and institutional practices.

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined how ESG perceptions influence sustainable behavior and the emergence of the "resilient citizen" in the metropolitan region of Attica, Greece. The findings highlighted the existence of a significant "value-action gap", primarily driven by economic constraints. Although the respondents generally recognized the importance of sustainability, limited financial capacity restricts the adoption of sustainable practices, particularly among lower-income groups. This finding confirms that resilience and participation in the green transition depend not only on environmental awareness but also on material and structural conditions.

The study also revealed that trust functions as a prerequisite for ESG engagement. Rather than encouraging stronger demands for governance, distrust and greenwashing tend to generate skepticism, disengagement, and brand avoidance. Thus, sustainability is not only a matter of environmental awareness. Citizens become resilient actors in urban development when affordability, trust, and credible accountability are present at the same time.

Demographic factors further shaped ESG perceptions. Women demonstrated greater sensitivity toward the social dimension of ESG, while higher educational attainment was associated with stronger demand for transparency and corporate governance. These findings underline the importance of education and awareness in promoting sustainable participation and responsible citizenship.

By examining how ESG perceptions influence trust, sustainable behavior and civic engagement, we identify some of the social conditions that enable or constrain urban resilience. However, the study presents certain limitations. The use of convenience sampling and the overrepresentation of young and highly educated respondents limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the research focused exclusively on residents of Attica and therefore may not fully reflect attitudes in rural or island regions of Greece. Future research could expand the analysis to different geographical contexts and demographic groups, while longitudinal studies could further explore how economic conditions influence trust and sustainable behavior over time.

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