


Social cynicism, greenwashing, and trust in green clothing brands

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Abstract

This research develops a theoretical model of the effect of social cynicism as a personality trait on trust in green clothing brands. We conducted an online survey of a representative Australian sample to test the hypothesized relationships. Our findings confirmed that social cynicism affected green brand trust negatively and that this effect can be explained by an increase in perceived greenwashing. Conspicuous consumption moderates this indirect influence. This mediated influence decreased when conspicuous consumption was more salient. Findings provide important practical insights for brand managers intending to avoid a decrease in brand trust regarding garments marketed with sustainability claims.

KEYWORDS

brand trust, conspicuous consumption, greenwashing, social cynicism, sustainable fashion

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumers' awareness of sustainability issues has in recent years increased the demand for eco-friendly products across different industries. The clothing industry constitutes a major player in this trend (Perera et al., 2018; Rausch et al., 2021). However, the industry faces crucial environmental issues, since, after the oil and gas sectors, the fashion industry is considered one of the most polluting, producing around 10% of the global carbon emissions (Legere & Kang, 2020; Muthukumarana et al., 2018), making current levels of consumption environmentally unsustainable (Johnstone & Tan, 2015).

The term *fast fashion* denotes garments distinguished by attributes such as low prices, short life cycles, cheap labor, and several clothing collections each year. Fast fashion encourages overconsumption, leading to negative environmental consequences (Park et al., 2017; Park & Kim, 2016). Conversely, the term *sustainable*

fashion denotes garments that incorporate features of social and environmental sustainability (Su et al., 2019). It addresses several negative issues of the fast fashion industry, to provide the adoption and implementation of measures such as the avoidance of animal cruelty, worker exploitation, or environmental hazard through the manufacturing process, to diminish the adverse social and environmental effects (Han et al., 2017; McNeill & Moore, 2015).

However, a significant attitude-behavior gap exists with respect to the purchase of sustainable products. Consumers claim to care about the environment, but most of them do not change their current consumption habits (Grimmer & Miles, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2018; Perera et al., 2018). Researchers have called for a better comprehension of the antecedents of sustainable consumer behavior (Jacobs et al., 2018; McNeill & Venter, 2019; Wang et al., 2022), and the factors that motivate consumers to adopt new environmental products (Flores & Jansson, 2022). In particular, it is necessary to increase our knowledge of the drivers of consumer

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behavior with regard to green garments (Kopplin & Rösch, 2021; Rausch et al., 2021). For instance, as Busalim et al. (2022) indicated, the understanding of consumer behavior and sustainable fashion is still insufficient since most published research still does not address sustainable fashion from a consumer behavior perspective; instead, most studies have focused on business models, supply chain management and trends in sustainable fashion.

Unfavorable organizational images and lack of trust are some of the variables that have been identified as potential barriers to green purchases (Sharma, 2021). The literature has also explored different variables as antecedents of green trust; including constructs such as perceived greenwashing (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), green perceived quality (Gil & Jacob, 2018), green perceived value (Lam et al., 2016), green image and physical environment quality (Chinomona & Chivhungwa, 2019), environmental knowledge (Dhir et al., 2021), and green brand image (Chen, 2010).

The literature has highlighted the need for more research on the antecedents of green trust (Lal et al., 2017). Social axioms have received so far little attention as such antecedents. Social axioms refer to generalized beliefs about oneself, the social and physical environment, or the spiritual world (Leung et al., 2002). Why individuals react differently to environmental issues may be explained by social axioms. Recently, Chan and Tam (2021) found empirical evidence that suggests that social axioms affect proenvironmental consumer behavior.

To address this gap in the literature, we study the effect of social cynicism, a social axiom that mainly refers to a negative view of society and its establishments (Leung & Bond, 2004; Singelis et al., 2003), on brand trust regarding green garments. The present study develops and empirically tests a conceptual framework to shed light for environmentally friendly garments on the relationship between social cynicism and brand trust. Since fashion brands now increasingly promote their environmental awareness, there is a need to understand how personality traits affect the perception of these companies' sustainability claims.

Furthermore, some studies have explored the negative relationship between consumers' greenwashing perceptions and consumer trust in green brands (Chen & Chang, 2013). However, the mediating effect of greenwashing perceptions in the relationship between social cynicism and consumer trust has not been addressed in previous studies. Thus, this study advances the literature by analyzing perceived greenwashing as a process explanation of the relationship between social cynicism and brand trust in the case of green fashion.

Finally, while the positive effect of conspicuous consumption—the need to signal status through possessions as a means of self-expression (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004)—on clothing choices and consumption (Cronje et al., 2016; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004) has been discussed in the literature, research on the link between conspicuous and sustainable consumption has been scarce (Hammad et al., 2019). Our framework studies the moderating effect of conspicuous motive on the indirect influence of social cynicism as a personality trait on brand trust regarding green garments.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Social cynicism

Social axioms are important in an individual's beliefs, and their main function is to enhance people's lives, serving them as a guide in their behavior (Leung et al., 2002). Social cynicism is a social axiom that is related to higher skepticism regarding peoples' values and motivations (Vice, 2011). Cynical persons distrust others' motives while holding the belief that people only do things to serve their own needs (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016). Social cynicism has been considered a personal characteristic that may vary among individuals (Abraham, 2000; Chan & Tam, 2021). Social cynicism has been linked to lower trust in social institutions and other persons (Leung et al., 2002; Singelis et al., 2003), unethical behaviors (Alexandra et al., 2017; Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014; Detert et al., 2008), lower interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility, lower hopefulness, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life (Bernardo & Nalipay, 2016; Lai et al., 2007). Social axioms may determine individuals' different responses to environmental issues (Chan & Tam, 2021). Social cynicism has been shown to negatively relate to environmental concerns, since cynical individuals are more skeptical of threats, and tend to deny the existence of environmental problems (Groneworld et al., 2012).

2.2 | Greenwashing

Growing environmental concern among consumers has led them to demand more sustainable options (Akturan, 2018; Nekmahmud & Fekete-Farkas, 2020). Green marketing has become a differentiator in the marketplace (Kahraman & Kazançoğlu, 2019) and companies' environmental performance has been shown to affect consumers' buying intentions (Grimmer & Bingham, 2013). These factors put pressure on companies to demonstrate their green practices (Berrone et al., 2017). However, when companies do not fulfill their “green claims,” greenwashing becomes a major issue (Akturan, 2018).

Greenwashing refers to the use of misleading proenvironmental claims (Terrachoice, 2007). There is evidence that brands engage in greenwashing—a selective disclosure about their environmental performance that deceives consumers with false claims about eco-friendly issues (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Greenwashing practices have been shown to negatively affect the attitude toward green products (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), the evaluations of brands and advertisements (Schmuck et al., 2018), and companies' financial performance (Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Greenwashing has been studied across industries such as banking (Khan et al., 2020), oil and gas (Scanlan, 2017), tourism (Self et al., 2010), and the clothing industry (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Leading fashion companies, for instance, Zara and H&M, have been shown to promote their green practices, while, at the same time, performing activities that negatively affect the environment (Munir & Mohan, 2022). Misleading information about environmental product

attributes diminishes consumers' trust and purchasing intentions, creating a negative view of the sustainable clothing industry (Nyilasy et al., 2014). Perceptions of practices of greenwashing negatively affect perceptions of companies' motives and actions toward the environment, diminishing green trust (Chen & Chang, 2013).

2.3 | Conspicuous consumption

Consumers display symbolic meaning to the self and others through consumption (Johnson et al., 2018; Sirgy, 1982). Individuals compete with others to demonstrate self-worth and social status. Research has demonstrated that the use of clothing brands may serve as a sign to display these characteristics to others (Cronje et al., 2016). Conspicuous consumption takes place when individuals communicate image or status to others through consumption or possessions (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004).

Conspicuous consumption motives have been positively related to consumer behaviors such as purchase decisions (Legere & Kang, 2020; Lundblad & Davies, 2016), social media posting (Taylor, 2020), or engaging in tourism activities (Boley et al., 2018). Conspicuous motivations enhance self-image, providing social status; for such cases, literature has coined terms such as "conspicuous pro-social consumption" (Johnson et al., 2018), "conspicuous compassion" (West, 2004), "conspicuous donation behavior" (Grace & Griffin, 2006), or "eco-conspicuous consumption" (Ramchandani & Coste-Maniere, 2018).

Conspicuous consumption has been identified as a motive for proenvironmental consumer behavior (Hammad et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2022). The use or acquisition of green products can enhance social status by increasing prosocial reputation or as a sign of wealth (Kohlová & Urban, 2020). According to Palomo-Vélez et al. (2021), consuming environmentally friendly products communicates desirable cues such as generosity and attractiveness. Eco-friendly products also provide consumers with acknowledgment as sustainable or environmentally committed individuals. For instance, in exploring the antecedents of environmentalism in the setting of smart mobility, Sestino et al. (2021) identified that consumers' levels of conspicuous consumption positively moderated the effect of innovativeness on environmentalism. The authors highlight that green products allow individuals to be recognized by others for their green behaviors, enhancing their social prestige. Furthermore, Beall et al. (2021) found that conspicuous consumption was positively associated with the intention to engage in ecotourism since it could be displayed as self-promotion in social media.

3 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

3.1 | Social cynicism and trust in green fashion

When consumers evaluate a fashion product's environmental claims and features, a major purchase barrier is a lack of provided

information and details to back up such claims (Tucker et al., 2012). Typically, they cannot verify by themselves the veracity of the environmental claims of the products labeled as eco-friendly (Schmuck et al., 2018) and need assistance on which consumption patterns they have to change to generate a positive environmental impact (Thøgersen, 2021). Consequently, consumers need to trust the source that asserts the sustainability of the products. Thus, branding becomes an essential element in the assessment of green claims (Hartmann et al., 2005). Trust is a significant determinant of consumer-brand relationships (Gefen & Straub, 2004). Higher levels of trust imply a more positive attitude toward and evaluation of the brand. In environmentally friendly products, green trust has been positively related to higher brand equity (Chen & Chang, 2013), word-of-mouth endorsement, and green purchase intentions (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021).

On the other hand, when consumers experience distrust or skepticism toward a firm's green claims, enhanced risk perceptions decrease purchase intention (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). There is significant evidence in the literature that a lack of trust hinders the consumption of green products (Aertsens et al., 2009).

More cynical individuals mistrust institutions and believe that organizations lack integrity and promote selfishness (Dean Jr. et al., 1998; Singelis et al., 2003; Vice, 2011), and this leads to negative reactions to cooperation or participation in actions that benefit all actors (Chiu, 2005). More cynical individuals are more suspicious of companies' environmental claims (Chan & Tam, 2021) and will tend to distrust the sustainability claims of fashion brands.

H1. Social cynicism has a negative relationship with trust in clothing brands featuring sustainability claims.

3.2 | The mediating influence of the perception of greenwashing

Building a sustainable brand largely depends on building brand credibility and consumers' trust in it (Chen & Chang, 2013). Greenwashing will diminish consumers' long-term trust in a brand, undermining their relationship with it (Kahraman & Kazançoğlu, 2019). Furthermore, greenwashing has been negatively associated with brand credibility (Ng et al., 2014), consumers' green trust (Chen & Chang, 2013), green branding equity and purchase intentions (Akturan, 2018), and product and brand perceptions (Nyilasy et al., 2012; Szabo & Webster, 2021). Higher perceptions of greenwashing affect green purchasing intentions since consumers distrust companies' green claims (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021).

More cynical persons are distrustful and doubtful (Leung et al., 2002; Stavrova et al., 2020). Social cynicism leads to distrust of the aims of others, including companies (Aqueveque & Encina, 2010). Skeptical consumers do not trust companies' green practices (Albayrak et al., 2013). Consumer cynicism is related to perceived greenwashing because it enhances consumers' suspicions that

companies' real motives do not align with sustainability (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Therefore, more socially cynical individuals will also be more prone to have higher greenwashing perceptions, that is, they believe that companies exaggerate or omit important environmental information. This perception in turn will negatively influence these consumers' brand trust regarding green garments brands. The relationship between social cynicism and consumers' trust in apparel brands featuring green claims can therefore be explained by a process mediated by perceived greenwashing.

H2. The negative relationship of social cynicism with trust in apparel brands featuring sustainability claims is mediated by an increase in the perceived greenwashing of fashion brands.

3.3 | The moderating role of conspicuous consumption motives

Previous research has shown a link between conspicuous and sustainable consumption behavior, since consuming environmentally friendly products may enhance status (Griskevicius et al., 2010). The consumption of eco-friendly products can communicate a prosocial self-image by spending resources for others (Sexton & Sexton, 2014). Assigning resources to sustainable options may enhance consumers' social position (Johnson et al., 2018). Sarkar et al. (2019) identified self-expression motives as antecedents of positive brand attitudes and buying intentions of green brands since individuals' capacity to contribute to the environment enhances their social image. For instance, consumers may be willing to spend more for the acquisition of an electric car to display prosocial behavior (Sexton & Sexton, 2014).

Recent studies highlight conspicuous motives in the consumption of green garments. For instance, Evans et al. (2022) showed an effect of secondhand fashion shopping behavior, as an alternative to fast-fashion products, on consumers' self-identity. Legere and Kang (2020) found that consumers' intentions for sustainable fashion consumption are driven by consumers' self-expression motives. By wearing fashionable clothing, consumers express themselves and show their self-worth to others (Sontag & Lee, 2004). Sun et al. (2022) and Apaolaza et al. (2023) showed that conspicuous motives are positively related to the purchase of eco-friendly fashion items, due to their symbolic and prestigious value, which helps consumers to project a positive image. Because of the generally higher cost of green garments, consumers wearing those can both display their environmental commitment and their capacity to incur in additional costs for the benefit of the environment. Conspicuous consumption is therefore not only relevant for highly-priced luxury fashion products but also for moderately priced clothing. A condition for this effect is that other consumers recognize that the garments in question are of the sustainable type, through specific design features and visible branding (e.g., Patagonia).

Furthermore, recent research has indicated that consumers' characteristics such as personality traits influence conspicuous consumption (Sun et al., 2020). Han et al. (2010) showed that individuals more

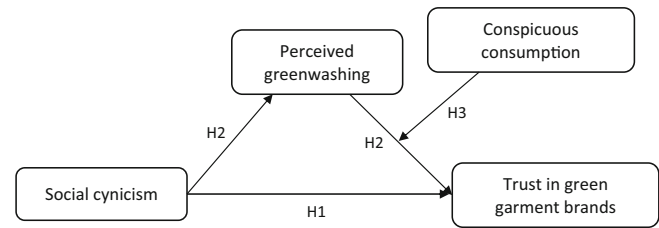


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model of the indirect relationship between social cynicism and brand trust toward apparel promoted with sustainability claims.

sensitive to status and self-promotion engage in behaviors to promote their self-image to others. Naderi and Strutton (2015) found that highly self-centered or narcissistically oriented individuals may engage in pro-environmental behaviors, as a means to show and demonstrate to others their capacity to afford higher expenses and their commitment to the environment, beyond their real responsibility.

Since individuals with higher conspicuous consumption motives will tend to consume green fashion products less because of their environmental impact than because of their social function, it seems likely that they will be less affected by social cynicism. Cynicism affects their attitude toward these brands less because sustainable fashion brands can still fulfill for them their function of self-representation, notwithstanding the degree of veracity of their sustainability claims. Consumers with higher (lower) levels of conspicuous consumption will, therefore, be less (more) susceptible to the influence of social cynicism on brand trust regarding green garments. Since the expected effect of social cynicism on trust is mediated by perceived greenwashing, this indirect influence will be moderated by conspicuous consumption motives, with the moderation affecting the influence of perceived greenwashing on trust. Because more conspicuous consumers prime the signaling effect of green fashion products rather than their concrete environmental impact, they will be less affected by the trust-decreasing influence of perceived greenwashing triggered by their social cynicism.

H3. Conspicuous consumption motives positively moderate the indirect negative relationship between social cynicism and trust in apparel promoted with sustainability claims mediated by greenwashing perceptions, through the moderation of the influence of perceived greenwashing on trust.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Participants and procedure

A representative survey of Australian consumers ($N = 600$) was conducted online to study the hypothesized relationships. The sample

Sample characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	352	58.7
	Male	246	41.0
	Other	2	0.3
Age	18–30	120	20.1
	31–40	120	20.1
	41–50	95	15.9
	51–60	78	12.9
	> 60	184	30.5
Household income	\$0–\$24,000	116	19.3
	\$25,000–\$49,000	168	28.0
	\$50,000–\$74,000	124	20.7
	\$75,000–\$99,000	81	13.5
	\$100,000 or greater	71	11.8
	Prefer not to say	40	6.7
Education	Year 12	136	22.7
	Trade certificate or diploma	179	29.8
	University degree	158	26.3
	Postgraduate or higher	82	13.7
	Other	45	7.5

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics ($N = 600$).

(age range 18–85, mean age = 47.84, $SD = 17.64$; 41.3% male) was provided by commercial panel provider Qualtrics (Table 1). To contextualize the subject of the survey, participants read in an introduction that currently many clothing brands were promoted as sustainable garments. Participants then completed a questionnaire measuring their general perception of greenwashing by clothing companies and how much they trusted sustainable fashion brands. They furthermore answered two groups of questions that measured their level of conspicuous consumption and degree of social cynicism.

4.2 | Measurement

The variables were measured with validated measures of the literature. We used four items adapted from the Social Axioms Survey to assess this personal trait (Leung et al., 2002). Participants rated each of these items on 7-point scales ranging from *strongly disbelieve* (1) to *strongly believe* (7). All further items were assessed on 7-point Likert scales. To measure consumers' greenwashing perception, five items from Apaolaza et al. (2023) were used, adapted from Chen and Chang (2013) and Schmuck et al. (2018). Two items from Apaolaza et al. (2023) were used, also adapted from a measure developed by Chen and Chang (2013), to assess the degree to which consumers were trusting fashion brands marketed as sustainable. Finally, we used Apaolaza et al.'s (2023) seven statements measuring conspicuous consumption motives, which draws on research into symbolic and status consumption (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004) and consumption as self-presentation (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012). Confirmatory factor analysis ($CFI = 0.93$; $RMSEA = 0.078$) confirmed an acceptable

measurement model (Table 2). Table 3 shows the discriminant validity test.

5 | RESULTS

For the data analysis, we used correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis with SPSS 26 as well as Hayes' (2017) PROCESS. Construct correlations (Table 3) confirmed a positive correlation between social cynicism and perceived greenwashing ($r = 0.46$, $p < .001$) and a negative correlation between brand trust regarding green garments and greenwashing ($r = -0.27$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis confirmed a negative relationship between brand trust regarding green garments and social cynicism ($b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.02$, $F = 10.72$, $p < .001$), supporting H1.

To address the mediating influence hypothesized in H2, we conducted a bootstrapping analysis with PROCESS, which confirmed an influence of social cynicism on trust indirectly through greenwashing (indirect effect: $b = -0.10$, $BSE = 0.03$, 95% BCI $[-0.16, -0.05]$; direct effect remaining: $b = -0.05$, $BSE = 0.05$, 95% BCI $[-0.15, 0.05]$; total effect: $b = -0.15$, $BSE = 0.05$, 95% BCI $[-0.24, -0.06]$).

Model 14 of PROCESS was used to test H3 proposing the moderated mediation. We also report the two multiple regression analyses that Process Model 14 conducts as part of the test for moderated mediation (Table 4). The first regression analysis, addressing the influence of social cynicism on perceived greenwashing, confirmed a significant effect ($b = 0.47$, $p < .001$). The full regression on the dependent variable brand trust showed that, when introducing perceived greenwashing into the equation, the effect of social cynicism

TABLE 2 Variables and measurement items.

	Mean	SD	F.L.	AV	CR	α
<i>Perceived greenwashing</i>	4.75	1.40		0.75	0.90	0.90
Gw1			0.66			
Gw2			0.75			
Gw3			0.84			
Gw4			0.88			
Gw5			0.88			
<i>Trust in green garment brands</i>	3.90	1.34		0.72	0.83	0.83
Tr1			0.84			
Tr2			0.85			
<i>Social cynicism</i>	5.12	1.07		0.50	0.79	0.79
Sc1			0.85			
Sc2			0.83			
Sc3			0.58			
Sc4			0.51			
<i>Conspicuous consumption motives</i>	3.97	1.62		0.61	0.91	0.91
Cc1			0.57			
Cc2			0.69			
Cc3			0.85			
Cc4			0.86			
Cc5			0.81			
Cc6			0.81			
Cc7			0.82			

Abbreviations: α , Cronbach's alpha; F.L., factor loadings; SD = Standard deviation.

TABLE 3 Construct correlations and discriminant validity.

	SC	PG	CC	
Social cynicism (SC)	0.71			
Perceived greenwashing (PG)	0.46***	0.87		
Conspicuous consumption (CC)	0.20***	0.14**	0.78	
Trust in green garment brands (TR)	-0.19***	-0.27***	0.35***	0.85

Note: In italic: square root of average variance extracted.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

was mostly replaced by the mediator. Mediator perceived greenwashing ($b = -0.53$) and the interaction term greenwashing \times conspicuous consumption ($b = 0.07$) had a significant effect. The significant effect of greenwashing, displacing the effect of social cynicism provides initial support for a mediating influence, with social cynicism affecting trust indirectly through its effect on perceived greenwashing. The significant effect of the interaction term greenwashing \times conspicuous consumption indicates that conspicuous consumption motives moderate the relationship of greenwashing with trust (Figure 2).

Moderated mediation analysis with model 14 of PROCESS, further confirmed that the relationship between social cynicism and brand trust was mediated by greenwashing, as well as that this indirect effect was moderated by conspicuous consumption motives (Table 5; $b_{\text{modmed}} = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $BCI [0.01, 0.06]$). Therefore, the mediation of the relationship between social cynicism and brand trust by greenwashing as proposed in H2 was confirmed, as well as that

this indirect influence was moderated by conspicuous consumption, supporting H3. Table 6 summarizes the verification of the hypotheses.

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | Theoretical contributions

Cynicism has been a construct explored in several research domains and disciplines, such as in the context of organizational justice (Kwantes & Bond, 2019), corporate behavior (Aqueveque & Encina, 2010; Stanley et al., 2005), psychology (Szymczak et al., 2020), and social exclusion (Choy et al., 2021). However, no prior study has discussed the relationship between social cynicism as a personality trait, and consumer trust in environmental products. This study provides a theoretical model addressing the link between social cynicism

DV	IV	B	SE	t	R ²	F
Greenwashing	Constant	2.10	0.26	8.00***	0.18	33.67***
	Social cynicism	0.47	0.04	10.74***		
	Age	0.01	0.01	2.52**		
	Female	0.01	0.09	0.13		
	Non-binary	1.11	0.76	1.43		
Green trust	Constant	5.38	0.58	9.70***	0.21	38.33***
	Social cynicism	-0.12	0.05	-2.57*		
	Greenwashing	-0.52	0.11	-4.79***		
	Conspicuous	0.01	0.13	0.03		
	Greenw. × Conspic.	0.07	0.03	2.76**		

TABLE 4 Linear regression analyses of effects on greenwashing (mediator) and green trust (with and without mediator and interaction term).

Note: ^a $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Greenwashing: perceived greenwashing. Green trust: trust in green garment brands. Conspicuous: conspicuous consumption.

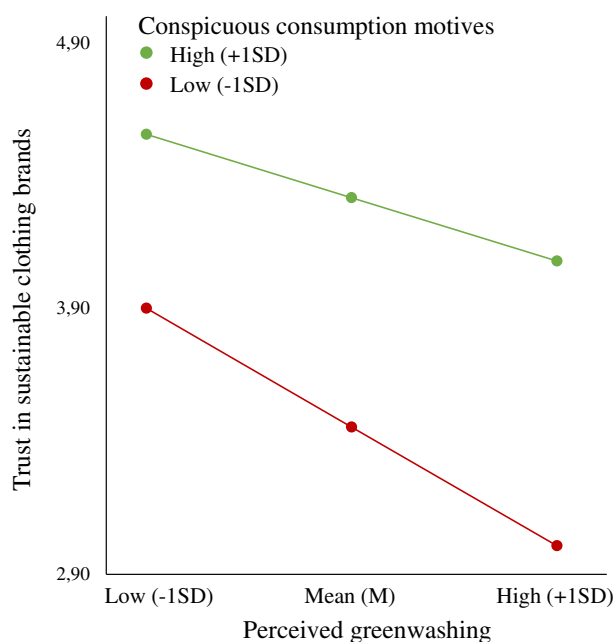


FIGURE 2 Moderating effect of conspicuous consumption motives.

and trust in apparel promoted with sustainability claims and explains this process with the mediation by perceived greenwashing, and the moderation of this indirect influence by conspicuous consumption motives.

Addressing fashion consumption from an environmental perspective has become necessary because the clothing industry has a severe environmental impact (Dhir et al., 2021; Legere & Kang, 2020) and has been singled out for exploiting human rights, animal welfare, and the use of nonrenewable resources, among other practices that harm the environment (D'Souza et al., 2015). This has led in recent years to increasing pressure on companies to demonstrate green actions (Berrone et al., 2017).

Our findings contribute to the further development of consumer theory in several ways. First, the results confirm the proposed

negative relationship between consumers' trust in clothing brands marketed as sustainable and social cynicism, providing new insight into the link between social cynicism and consumer trust in the sustainability context. This result provides support for the social cynicism literature asserting that this trait conditions a negative stance toward organizations (Leung et al., 2010; Singelis et al., 2003; Vice, 2011). Highly cynical individuals tend to disbelieve organizations' claims and actions (Indibara & Varshney, 2021). Findings complement the recent work of Chan and Tam (2021) who found that social cynicism influences individuals' environmental attitudes, calling for the exploration of social axioms on specific environmental issues.

Second, the greenwashing mediation-based process explanation of the relationship between social cynicism and brand trust adds a novel perspective to the cynicism-trust link. While previous research has found that greenwashing perceptions trigger mistrust of companies' environmental concerns, leading to negative relationships with the brand (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018), our study shows that the influence of cynicism on trust can be explained by an increase in the perception that the firm is using misleading sustainability claims. More cynical individuals tend to believe that institutions are biased, which in turn increases the perception that companies do not provide environmental benefits as they claim, negatively impacting consumer trust. This process explanation extends the so far scarce research on the effects of social axioms on consumers' trust in companies' environmental practices (e.g., Chan & Tam, 2021) and greenwashing (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018) by highlighting the role of perceived greenwashing as an important mediator of the social axiom-trust link.

Third, the moderating influence of conspicuous consumption motives provides a novel perspective on conspicuous consumption behavior. Findings confirmed that the mediated effect of social cynicism on brand trust through perceived greenwashing becomes weaker for individuals with stronger conspicuous consumption motives. More conspicuous consumers are less affected by the negative effect of greenwashing on trust because they are principally motivated by the social image projected by their consumption of sustainable fashion brand clothing, not by its actual environmental

TABLE 5 Moderated mediation analysis of the indirect relationship mediated by greenwashing between brand trust in green garments and social cynicism.

Moderator	Mediator	Values of the moderator	Conditional indirect influence	Bootstrapp SE	Bootstrapp LLCI	Bootstrapp ULCI
CC	PG	2.66 (-1SD)	-0.16	0.03	-0.22	-0.09
		3.97 (M)	-0.11	0.03	-0.17	-0.06
		5.29 (+1SD)	-0.07	0.04	-0.14	0.01

Note: Age and two gender dummy variables (female and non-binary, male gender representing the reference category) were introduced as covariates. Abbreviations: CC, conspicuous consumption; PG, perceived greenwashing.

TABLE 6 Hypotheses verification.

Hypothesis	Hypothesized association	Expected sign	Result
H1	Social cynicism → trust in sustainable fashion	-	Supported
H2	Social cynicism → perceived greenwashing → trust in green garment brands	-	Supported
H3	Moderation by conspicuous consumption motives	+	Supported

impact. Because greenwashing perceptions mediate the relationship between social cynicism and brand trust, these individuals' trust in sustainable fashion brands will be less affected by their degree of social cynicism. Prior literature on conspicuous consumption has studied its antecedents (Bronner & de Hoog, 2019; Han et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2020) and its effects on proenvironmental consumption (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Hammad et al., 2019; Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012). Our findings contribute to this theory because we show that conspicuous consumption can affect consumers' trust in sustainable brands by modulating the effect of consumers' cynicism on brand trust, through its moderating effect on the greenwashing-trust link, which mediates the influence of cynicism on trust. Findings have therefore significant implications for the study of conspicuous sustainable consumption behavior because conspicuous consumption motives have the potential to foster such behavior, but also to reduce consumers' sensitivity toward greenwashed sustainability claims.

6.2 | Managerial implications

Our findings provide practitioners with novel insights. First, social cynicism is negatively related to trust in sustainable fashion clothing brands. Managers should provide clear and relevant information to customers to avoid appearances of deception and reduce consumers' suspicions (Ketrone, 2016). At the point of purchase, this can be achieved through quick response (QR) codes, which can redirect customers to a website with further information and educate consumers about the manufacturing process (Atkinson, 2013). Another option are green mobile applications, which have been proven to have a prominent role in enabling consumers to access pertinent information about the products at any location and time (Perera et al., 2018). Online applications may allow customers to preview and interact with sustainable fashion clothing, so they can become familiar with the products, especially since increasing familiarity may reduce suspicions (Chaouali et al., 2017). Online applications

can provide customers with opportunities to interact with the products before purchase decisions. In this way, consumers can have more information and the possibility to compare different options concerning the origin of the materials used to manufacture the garment and the impact of production methods on the environment.

Second, when developing specific communications to target environmental-consciousness consumers practitioners should keep in mind that a proportion of their potential clients are more cynical and will react with increased sensitivity to greenwashed claims, which in turn will affect trust in their brand. Any suspicion of greenwashing should, therefore, be avoided. Companies should employ only certified and unambiguous sustainability claims. Retailers should establish a clear eco-friendly positioning, and consistency across all customers' touchpoints (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019), highlighting the eco-friendly and social credentials of their products and services (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014). Companies should also be committed and demonstrate to consumers social facets of sustainability such as fair working standards (Rausch et al., 2021). Since companies' unethical behavior contributes to the installment of social cynicism among stakeholders (Detert et al., 2008), managers should develop programs to increase the ethical credibility of their brands (Crane, 2005) and initiatives to reduce consumer skepticism by strengthening their "green management" (Zhang et al., 2018). They should provide credible evidence, such as demonstrating that the garments fulfill the environmental claims that they promote. Furthermore, managers should implement mechanisms to obtain feedback from consumers about the credibility of their sustainability claims.

Practitioners should furthermore be aware that their customers' conspicuous consumption motives influence the susceptibility to the negative effects of social cynicism on trust in their brands because a high conspicuous motivation lowers the negative influence of the perception of greenwashing on brand trust. Managers should intend to enhance the prosocial reputation derived from sustainable products. Products' uniqueness also influences status consumption (Chan et al., 2015), therefore, limited editions of unique sustainable garments can increase consumers' purchase motivations because they potentially enhance perceived status.

6.3 | Limitations and further research avenues

Because the data on which our findings are based are cross-sectional, the results limit causal inferences. Future studies should address this limitation by testing the proposed model experimentally. These studies should also re-assess some of the coefficients of this model that, albeit significant, have small effect sizes (i.e., the direct effect of social cynicism on trust, which in our analysis explains only about 2% of the variation in trust). While practitioners should be cautious with the application of recommendations based on small effect sizes, a statistically significant effect in the present survey data, even if small, could point to a larger effect in real consumer behavior. Because of social desirability bias, consumers may be reluctant to report the true extent of their social cynicism, which may have affected the effect sizes in our data. In addition, (n)ethnographic methods could be employed to further deepen the understanding of the underlying process of the social cynicism-trust link (Perera et al., 2018). The application of these methods could lead to identifying further moderators. For instance, consumers' independent versus interdependent self-construal (Singelis, 1994) could interact with this process. This research has focused on sustainable fashion clothing brands. However, ecological or signaling concerns may vary across categories (Kahraman & Kazançoğlu, 2019). Therefore, future research should consider the analysis of other contexts to provide a wider perspective of the phenomenon.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

This research addresses extant gaps in consumer theory regarding the drivers of sustainable consumer behavior and, in particular, the factors that motivate consumers to adopt new sustainable products (Busalim et al., 2022; Flores & Jansson, 2022; Jacobs et al., 2018). For this purpose, this research addresses the previously unexplored relationship between social cynicism as a personality trait and consumers' trust in sustainable fashion brands. The study provides evidence that more cynical individuals are less trustful concerning the environmental motivation and reputation of sustainable fashion clothing brands. Cynical individuals are more likely to perceive companies' sustainability engagement as greenwashing, which in turn decreases their trust in these brands. However, this study also argues and empirically confirms that these effects are weaker for individuals with stronger conspicuous consumption motives. The benefit that consumers perceive from conspicuous sustainable consumption seems to be less affected by the truthfulness of a fashion brand's sustainability claims.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are available from the corresponding author.

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