

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainable clothing: Why conspicuous consumption and greenwashing matter

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Abstract

This study analyzes the degree to which conspicuous consumption motives, environmental concern, perceived consumer effectiveness, trust in sustainable clothing brands, and perceived greenwashing trigger the purchase of sustainable clothing. The theoretical framework was tested with a representative online sample of the Australian population ($N = 600$). Results showed that all proposed antecedents have a positive relationship with the purchase of sustainable clothing, with the exception of perceived greenwashing, which decreases purchase intention. In addition, perceived consumer effectiveness positively moderated the effect of conspicuous consumption motives on purchasing. Conspicuous consumption motives had a stronger effect on purchase when perceived effectiveness was high, and this influence was reduced for lower perceived effectiveness. The interaction between conspicuous consumption and perceived efficacy had the strongest effect in the model. Our findings highlight the relevance of conspicuous consumption as a motive for switching to sustainable clothing and the likewise important role of perceived consumer effectiveness, which is a boundary condition for this effect. Findings also confirm the significant positive influence of environmental concern and trust in the sustainable clothing brand, while perceived greenwashing is a barrier to the adoption of sustainable clothing. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS

brand trust, conspicuous consumption, greenwashing, perceived consumer effectiveness, sustainable clothing, sustainable consumer behavior

1 | INTRODUCTION

From production to purchase, the clothing industry contributes highly to environmental degradation. The extensive use of resources during production in this sector generates approximately 10% of global carbon emissions, placing it among the economic sectors responsible for most of the global emissions (Cocquyt et al., 2020; Conca, 2015; Muthukumarana et al., 2018). Fashion consumption is based on a high

product turnover, resulting in a considerable number of textiles, that could have been reused or recycled, being sent to landfills (Colucci & Vecchi, 2021; Remy et al., 2016). To address these problems, part of the clothing industry is putting effort into manufacturing more *sustainable clothing*, which involves manufacturing processes with more environmentally friendly techniques, including the use of organic or recycled materials to produce garments designed for a more enduring use (Jacobs et al., 2018; Joergens, 2006; Sadiq et al., 2021). The

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sustainable clothing market has gained significant momentum due to growing environmental awareness in the industry, changing consumer beliefs, and considerably positive consumer attitudes toward green products (Elf et al., 2022; Khare & Sadachar, 2017; Saha et al., 2021; Young et al., 2010). Sustainable product attributes (i.e., recycled materials) have been shown to positively influence consumers' purchase intentions even for luxury and fast fashion products (Grazzini et al., 2021).

To effectively promote sustainable clothing, it is necessary to identify the key drivers of consumers' motivation of transitioning to and adopting these clothing products. In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in sustainable clothing (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2018; Kim & Oh, 2020; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Appendix A provides an overview of research focusing on sustainable clothing. In a systematic review of the literature, Busalim et al. (2022) found that most of the published articles on sustainable fashion are typically not from a consumer behavior perspective but rather focus on understanding trends within sustainable fashion research, implications on the supply chain, and sustainable business models. Moreover, of those articles that address the issue from the perspective of consumer behavior, a large majority focuses on the analysis of the effect of variables linked to the green values and environmental awareness of consumers, while very few on factors related to symbolic values and signaling of consumption (Han et al., 2017; Hill & Lee, 2015; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Park & Lin, 2020). Research has also provided mixed results concerning the relationship between consumers' environmental attitudes and their adoption of sustainable clothing (Busalim et al., 2022; Diddi et al., 2019; ElHaffar et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2018; Park & Lin, 2020; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Consumption of fashion products may be a particularly complex phenomenon because clothing goes beyond utilitarian function and is related strongly to the individual's need to express their identity and gain social acceptance (Joy et al., 2012; Niinimäki, 2010; Preuit & Yan, 2016). According to Diddi et al. (2019), consumers engage in sustainable clothing consumption behaviors because of a commitment to sustainability, local sourcing, exclusivity, and lifestyle changes. While there exist fragmented research findings, so far, the literature lacks a clear perspective of which are the most relevant drivers of sustainable fashion purchases.

The present study addresses this gap in the literature by proposing and testing the effect of several antecedents of sustainable fashion purchases, that had not been addressed previously, or for which findings have not been conclusive. Despite the salient signaling function of clothing, previous research has overlooked the potentially significant role of conspicuous consumption motives in the consumption of sustainable clothing. Environmental psychology research has shown that conspicuous consumption motives are an important driver of green consumption (Hammad et al., 2019; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Policarpo & Aguiar, 2020). Through the consumption of sustainable clothing, consumers can project a pro-environmental and prosocial image, signaling their engagement through spending resources on products that benefit society and the environment.

Conspicuous consumption is likely a significant motive for the adoption of sustainable clothing.

Greenwashing, on the other hand, may constitute a significant barrier to the purchase of sustainable clothing. To what extent do consumers perceive that fashion brands are insincere in their environmental engagement and how does this affect their purchase? Previous research on greenwashing in the case of sustainable clothing has been scarce (e.g., Sailer et al., 2022). Our theoretical framework proposes that the perception of greenwashing by fashion brands reduces purchases of sustainable clothing.

Our theoretical framework addresses the effect of these variables together with the effect of three further variables that have been popular in green consumption research: We included the effect of perceived consumer effectiveness, that is, the extent to which consumers believe that they can have actually a significant effect on the state of the environment, and we address the discussion on the environmental attitudes–behavior gap by considering the role of environmental concern. We further address the effect of consumers' trust in sustainable clothing brands, since green trust has been identified in previous research as a significant driver of green purchases.

Analyzing these five variables in one model will provide an integrative framework to the literature and will contribute to identifying which are the most relevant drivers of sustainable clothing purchases. We tested the model with a representative sample of Australian consumers who reported on their actual sustainable fashion purchases. Findings provide marketers with important insight regarding which factors to focus on when promoting sustainable fashion.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: We first develop a conceptual framework of the drivers of sustainable clothing purchases. We then present the results of the empirical study testing this framework. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and provide future research avenues.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Conspicuous consumption of sustainable clothing

Conspicuous displays—whether through goods, clothing, or actions—signal the personal image individuals want to project and facilitate social relationships (Amatulli et al., 2018; Goffman, 1959). The projected personal image, whether real or perceived, may be related to character traits, religious affiliations, wealth, or social status (Johnson et al., 2018; Lewis & Moital, 2016). Conspicuous behaviors have been explained by *costly signaling theory* and *social identity theory*. *Costly signaling theory* (Grafen, 1990; Zahavi, 1977) proposes from an evolutionary psychology perspective that humans engage in costly behaviors, that is, behaviors that are not immediately necessary for the survival of the individual, to broadcast to others that they have surplus genetic fitness and abundance of resources. *Social identity theory* explains the individual's drive to enhance their self-concept through

conformity with group norms (Turner & Oakes, 1986), which reward individuals with social approval (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). The consumption of goods to subsequently project a specific image, often with the intention of exhibiting wealth and success and consequently gaining a desired social status, has been termed conspicuous consumption (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Ordayeva & Chandon, 2011; Veblen, 1899). Consumers may purchase specific products or brands to become identified with these products or brands' values, which may include immaterial values such as self-fulfillment, a sense of belonging, security, self-respect, warm relationships with others, being well respected, and a sense of accomplishment (Solomon et al., 2002). Conspicuous consumption can be a motive for unsustainable consumer behavior. Consumers can be motivated to purchase non-sustainable luxury items to indicate their financial status (Cervellon et al., 2019), and, as Mi et al. (2018) showed for the case of Chinese consumers, displays of materialism, and social status can be important triggers of high-carbon consumption.

However, conspicuous consumption can also be an important driver of sustainable consumer behavior. Consumers can be motivated to purchase environmentally friendly products to signal their environmental compromise and engagement (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Hammad et al., 2019; Sexton & Sexton, 2014). Griskevicius et al. (2010) argued that conspicuous green consumption can be explained by the costly signaling theory. Because green products are often more expensive and sometimes underperform compared with their conventional counterparts, green consumers communicate their willingness and ability to bear additional costs for the good of nature and society by purchasing such products. Thus, an increasing number of studies have focused on conspicuous motives as a significant driver of green consumption (Delgado et al., 2015; Policarpo & Aguiar, 2020; Yarimoglu & Binboga, 2019).

From a social identity theory perspective (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Turner & Oakes, 1986), conspicuous green consumption can be explained by the drive to display conformity with pro-environmental group norms, either an individual's peer group or the wider society, where sustainable consumer behavior is increasingly being perceived as a general norm. Signaling environmental engagement may indeed have an evolutionary pay-off: As Palomo-Vélez et al.'s (2021) review of evolutionary psychology research and climate change suggests, green consumers are perceived as particularly generous and attractive romantic partners.

Since conspicuous motives may drive consumers to choose green products over non-green alternatives, this may especially be the case for fashion products, because clothing—by its nature—is mostly consumed conspicuously, as these products are on public display when in use. Clothing has been shown to function as a conspicuous symbol (Lewis & Moital, 2016; Rahman et al., 2010; Woodside, 2012). Hence, when consumers opt for green clothing items, conspicuous motives may likely play a significant role, as these purchases allow them to signal their concern for the environment and willingness to contribute to the common good. In addition, conspicuous motives can induce consumers to buy sustainable clothing brands because this may enhance an individual's status and reputation.

H1. Conspicuous consumption motives have a positive effect on the purchase of sustainable clothing.

2.2 | Environmental concern as a driver of sustainable clothing purchase

Defined as an individual's degree of awareness of environmental problems, environmental concern can have a significant impact on the degree to which individuals are motivated to change their behavioral practices to try to minimize these problems (Mostafa, 2009; Séguin et al., 1998). Thus, one way to express environmental concern is to consume more environmentally friendly products. Environmental concern can directly influence consumer attitudes toward environmental products (Dangélico et al., 2021; Lee, 2008; Yadav & Pathak, 2016). Several studies have analyzed the relationship between environmental concern and the intention to purchase green products (Park & Lin, 2020; Prakash & Pathak, 2017). However, although consumers are concerned about the environment, some studies revealed a significant concern-behavior gap in the consumer behavior observed in green consumption, and environmental concern will not always translate into environmentally friendly behavior (Cerri et al., 2018; He et al., 2021; Landry et al., 2018). Because of the sustainable marketing activities of many fashion labels, we expect consumers to be increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of clothing, and this concern is activated in the shopping situation, where also sustainable alternatives to conventional fashion products are more and more available. We, therefore, expect that the concern-behavior gap is reduced in the case of sustainable clothing consumption and that consumers' environmental concern will have some impact on their purchase decision.

H2. Consumers' environmental concern has a positive effect on the purchase of sustainable clothing.

2.3 | The effect of trust in sustainable clothing brands

Trust is understood to be the degree of willingness to believe that the other party will behave as expected (Ganesan, 1994; Hart & Saunders, 1997). Chen (2010) defined green trust as the willingness to depend on a green product or service based on a belief or expectation resulting from its credibility, benevolence, and skills concerning its environmental performance. Green trust is based on the belief in the product's potential to protect the environment (Wang et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2017).

In the literature on green consumption behavior, green trust has been discussed in different consumption contexts and is considered a crucial cognitive measure, especially where uncertainty is high, as is the case with green hotels, organic food, and other green products (Amin & Tarun, 2020; Ricci et al., 2018; Yadav et al., 2019). These

uncertainties are primarily the result of company practices promoting products based on misleading green claims and exaggerating their environmental value. Consumers may find themselves doubting whether a specific brand of green clothes is truly sustainable or whether the sustainability claim is just a marketing trick (Neumann et al., 2020). For these reasons, trust in the sustainable clothing brand is a significant factor, as it minimizes the skepticism arising from greenwashing practices (Dhir et al., 2021; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Regarding the antecedents of trust in green fashion brands, Neumann et al. (2020) found that the perceptions of social responsibility in the sustainability efforts of the brand positively affect consumers' trust in the brand. Dhir et al. (2021) showed that green trust and environmental attitude predicted green apparel buying behavior. These studies suggest that trust in green fashion brands can increase consumption of sustainable clothing and that, on the contrary, low consumer confidence in the sustainable clothing brand is a barrier to adopting more sustainable garments:

H3. Trust in sustainable clothing brands has a positive effect on the purchase of sustainable clothing.

2.4 | The negative influence of perceived greenwashing

To attract consumers with green purchase intentions, many companies use green marketing strategies to communicate their environmental efforts and project an environmentally responsible image. However, not all green marketing claims reflect the true environmental conduct of the company. Some companies mask negative information about their impact or only partially disclose this information (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Marquis et al., 2016), while others intentionally mislead using false advertisements claiming that they are environmentally responsible when, in fact, they are not (Martínez et al., 2020; Szabo & Webster, 2021).

When consumers realize that certain green products present misleading information, a reputation for greenwashing is formed, which compels consumers to be more cautious about these products and increases their predisposition to discovering negative information about other brands in the sector (Chen & Chang, 2013a; Nyilasy et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2019). Some of the recent and extensive sustainability efforts of clothing companies may generate uncertainty regarding the veracity of the information provided. Indeed, many of the vague and unspecific sustainability claims used by the clothing industry are likely more a reflection of greenwashing practices than of genuine environmental engagement. For instance, a Swedish fashion brand has received complaints for using unfounded sustainability claims in a fashion line labeled as “conscious.” Consumers will likely react negatively to news of greenwashing in the fashion industry, combined with their awareness of the abundance of vague green claims, lacking a clear specification of the environmental or social benefits of the product. In consequence, consumers might develop a general suspicion of greenwashing in the fashion industry, which likely

will negatively impact their purchases of sustainably labeled clothing products.

H4. Perceived greenwashing has a negative influence on the purchase of sustainable clothing.

2.5 | The role of perceived consumer effectiveness

According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), perceived behavioral control is an important behavioral antecedent. Ajzen's perceived behavioral control dimension is based on the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977). In green consumption behavior research, the term *perceived consumer effectiveness* (PCE) has been widely used to refer to behavioral control and self-efficacy. PCE refers to the degree to which an individual believes their efforts might be able to mitigate environmental and social problems. The construct has been as prominent as environmental concern in analyzing consumer engagement with environmental issues (Ellen et al., 1991; Jaiswal & Singh, 2018; Niedermeier et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2018). Kinnear et al. (1974) first explored PCE as a personality variable for predicting environmental concern. Roberts (1996) identified PCE as one of the attitudinal variables that predict green consumer behavior. The more consumers feel that their behavior can reduce environmental problems, the more they consider the impact of their purchases, and the more disposed they are to purchasing sustainable products (D'Souza et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2016; Nguyen & Pervan, 2020). Several studies have shown that individuals who believe that their behavior can have a positive impact on the environment are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behavior (Higuera-Castillo et al., 2019; Jaiswal & Kant, 2018; Mansoor & Paul, 2022). For instance, Cojuharenco et al. (2016) found that PCE has a positive influence on consumer recycling and green purchasing behaviors. Taufique and Vaithianathan (2018) confirmed PCE as an important antecedent of green purchase intentions in young consumers. Higuera-Castillo et al. (2019) found that the effect of attitude on purchase intention regarding hybrid and electric vehicles is more pronounced among consumers with a high level of PCE. While PCE has not been studied for the specific case of sustainable clothing, in light of extant PCE research, it seems likely that a higher level of PCE will increase consumers' motivation to purchase sustainable clothing. The greater their belief that their purchases matter and that they can help mitigate the negative impact of the clothing industry on the environment, the greater will be their intention to switch to sustainable clothing:

H5. Perceived consumer effectiveness has a positive effect on the purchase of sustainable clothing.

Apart from triggering purchase behavior, PCE may also moderate the effect of another driver of sustainable purchasing. Because PCE determines the impact a consumer perceives they will have on the environment, it may also moderate the influence of conspicuous consumption motives proposed in Hypothesis 1. The more the consumer believes

that their action will make a real difference for the environment, the more they will also believe that others feel the same. For conspicuous consumption to provide the expected benefits, it is thus necessary that the individual believes that others perceive a real, as opposed to an insignificant or phony contribution to sustainability. When a consumer feels that the real environmental impact of sustainable clothing is negligible, they will not be motivated to display their environmental engagement by purchasing these products.

H6. Perceived consumer effectiveness positively moderates the effect of conspicuous consumption motives on the purchase of sustainable clothing. For consumers with high (low) perceived consumer efficacy the influence of conspicuous consumption motives on the purchase of sustainable clothing will be stronger (weaker).

Figure 1 shows the proposed conceptual model.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants and procedure

To test the proposed conceptual framework, we conducted a nationally representative online survey of Australian consumers. Australian consumers are an adequate sample to test our framework because they show on average a significant environmental concern, and there is a large consumer segment interested in sustainable clothing. Given the impact of climate change in terms of bushfires and floods, more than half of the population (56%) reported that they are worried about climate change (Euromonitor International, 2021). Other research showed that nine out of 10 Australian consumers are likely to purchase ethical and sustainable products (Arreza, 2020). They are environmentally savvy and are keen on adopting a sustainable clothing lifestyle (Khan et al., 2022). Also, the Australian apparel market is

now anticipated to increase to a value of \$21.7 billion by the end of 2025, an increase of 28.6% since 2020 (Datamonitor, 2021). We conducted a quantitative study to assess and compare the effect strengths of different antecedents of green clothing purchases in the general population. While a qualitative approach can provide a different perspective and enrich findings, a qualitative approach alone would not have allowed a larger scale, representative assessment of the proposed model.

The survey was conducted with a nationally representative online sample of Australian consumers aged 18 years and older ($N = 600$, 58.7% female, $M_{age} = 47.84$, $SD = 17.64$, age range: 18–85) recruited by Qualtrics. Participants received a monetary incentive to participate in the study. We instructed Qualtrics to provide an approximately representative population sample in terms of age, gender, household income, and education. The sample was drawn randomly from an online panel of Australian consumers recruited by Qualtrics and adjusted by Qualtrics to approximately representative population quotas in age, gender, household income, and education. The quotas were established by Qualtrics according to the company's information on population data (Appendix B). The quality of the sample and responses is backed by Qualtrics's internal data control. The random sampling method rules out sampling bias. Participants that show uncooperative behavior are removed from Qualtrics's panel. The data quality was further audited by Qualtrics, with fast responders and participants responding consistently with the same extreme values being removed and substituted by new sample units before the data set was provided. The data were checked for consistency and missing values. No sample units were removed. The data were further analyzed for extreme values. There were no outliers greater than 3 SD from the corresponding mean values.

The online questionnaire presented participants with an introductory sentence stating that at present, many fashion brands are marketed as sustainable fashion. Because the aim of the survey was to assess the participants' general responses toward fashion marketed as sustainable, the questionnaire did not provide any further prompts

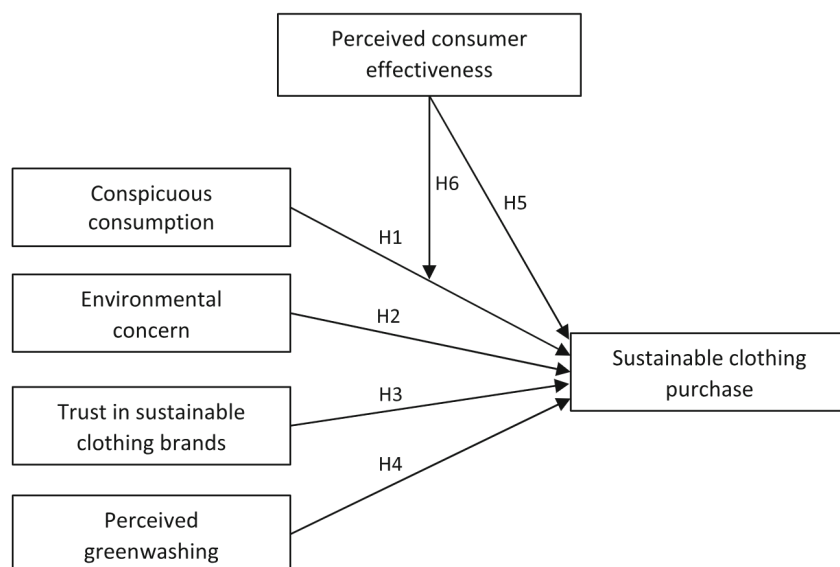


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model

regarding specific fashion brands or styles. The questionnaire then assessed the participants' actual purchases of sustainable fashion, as well as their perceptions of greenwashing by clothing companies, trust in sustainable clothing brands, environmental concern, perceived consumer effectiveness, and conspicuous consumption motives when buying sustainable clothing.

3.2 | Measurement

Because, as mentioned above, our study aimed to analyze general attitudes and responses toward sustainable clothing, all measurement items referred to the generic consumption of sustainable clothing without specifying brands or styles. Each participant, therefore, rated these items according to their individual opinion concerning sustainable clothing in general. To measure *conspicuous consumption motives*, the questionnaire included seven statements extracted from research into symbolic consumption, status consumption, and environmental

conspicuous consumption (Eastman et al., 1999; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Lewis & Moital, 2016; O’Cass, 2000; O’Cass & McEwen, 2004; Roy Chaudhuri et al., 2011; Solomon, 1983). *Environmental concern* was measured using four items from Rausch and Kopplin’s (2021) study, which measured this variable using scales adapted from Lee (2008) and Dunlap et al. (2000). For the measurement of the *PCE* variable in the context of sustainable clothing purchase, we adapted D’Souza et al.’s (2015) scale. *Consumer trust in sustainable clothing brands* was measured using two items from Chen (2010) and Chen and Chang (2013b). To assess *perceived greenwashing*, we used five items extracted from the scales used in previous studies (Chen & Chang, 2013a; Mohr, 1998; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021; Schmuck et al., 2018). All items addressing the five independent variables were rated using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

To assess whether participants had actually *purchased sustainable clothing*, we used Rausch and Kopplin’s (2021) measure based on Lee (2008) and Schlegelmilch et al. (1996). Participants rated on two

TABLE 1 Variables and measurement items with mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha

	M	SD	α
Conspicuous consumption motives	3.97	1.62	.91
I think that buying sustainable clothing ...			
...engenders popularity among friends and colleagues.	4.01	1.58	
...means wealth.	3.77	1.67	
...enables people to show off, to be noticed.	3.84	1.62	
...enables people to feel more important.	4.09	1.59	
...enables people to improve the image of themselves that they project to others.	4.15	1.56	
...sustainable clothes are social status symbols.	4.10	1.66	
...sustainable clothes are a symbol of success and prestige.	3.83	1.68	
Environmental concern	5.00	1.62	.92
I am concerned about the state of the environment.	5.03	1.57	
I am concerned about the long-term consequences of unsustainable behavior.	5.12	1.62	
I often think about the degradation of the environment.	4.74	1.61	
I am concerned that humanity will inflict permanent damage on the environment.	5.13	1.70	
Perceived consumer effectiveness	4.50	1.52	.89
I think that by buying from these sustainable clothing brands ...			
I can positively influence society and the environment.	4.24	1.51	
I can help to create a more sustainable and caring society.	4.48	1.47	
I can help to reduce the problem of global warming.	4.45	1.59	
I can reduce my carbon footprint.	4.84	1.53	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	M	SD	α
Trust in sustainable clothing brands	3.90	1.34	.83 (.77 ^a)
The environmental concern of these clothing brands' meets my expectations.	3.87	1.35	
I feel that the environmental reputation of these clothing brands is generally reliable.	3.93	1.33	
Perceived greenwashing	4.75	1.40	.90
I think most of these products/brands are ...			
...not produced totally of environmentally friendly materials.	4.86	1.32	
...not always manufactured under sustainable conditions.	4.86	1.41	
...professing green claims that are vague or seemingly unprovable.	4.65	1.40	
...omitting or masking important information, making their green claims sound better than they are.	4.67	1.45	
...exaggerating the actual green functionality of the product.	4.71	1.45	
Purchase behavior	3.47	1.71	.86
I regularly buy sustainable clothing.	3.46	1.74	(.76 ^a)
I frequently buy sustainable clothing even if they are more expensive than conventional clothing.	3.48	1.70	

^aPearson correlation coefficient.

Variables	CC	EC	PCE	GT	PG	PB
Conspicuous consumption (CC)	.83					
Environmental concern (EC)	.24 ^{***}	.87				
Perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE)	.35 ^{***}	.60 ^{***}	.83			
Green trust (GT)	.34 ^{***}	.05	.23 ^{***}	.85		
Perceived greenwashing (PG)	.12 ^{**}	.31 ^{***}	.16 ^{***}	-.23 ^{***}	.81	
Purchase behavior (PB)	.50 ^{***}	.38 ^{***}	.52 ^{***}	.34 ^{***}	.02	.87

Note: Square roots of each construct's AVE in the diagonal.

^{***} $p < .001$.

^{**} $p < .01$.

7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) the extent to which they frequently purchased sustainable clothing and whether they had purchased it even at a higher price. All measurement items, in addition to the means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas, are presented in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha confirmed the reliability of all scales, as all values were above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010). The average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.65 to 0.76 and from 0.84 to 0.92, respectively, well above the minimum recommended level of 0.5 for AVE and 0.6 for CR (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A single factor over all measurement items explained 26% of overall variance, significantly less than the 50% threshold for common method variance concern, providing evidence against significant common method variance. Table 2 presents the square roots of each construct's AVE in the

diagonal showing that the square root of the AVE of each construct was greater than its correlation with other constructs—confirming discriminant validity.

4 | RESULTS

To determine the individual effect of each of the five independent variables (perceived greenwashing, trust in sustainable clothing brands, environmental concern, PCE, and conspicuous consumption motives) on the purchase of sustainable clothing, we conducted multiple linear regression analysis with SPSS 26. The regression model was overall significant ($p < .001$) and explained a significant proportion of the variance of the dependent variable ($R^2 = .42$). Regarding

TABLE 2 Variable correlations

assumptions testing, the normal probability (*P-P*) plot of standardized regression residuals was nearly overlapping the diagonal, confirming approximately normal distributed errors (Durbin-Watson = 1.90). Also, multicollinearity was ruled out since, with detection-tolerance values ranging from .58 to .82 and variance inflation factors (VIF) ranging from 1.21 to 1.69, indicators for multicollinearity were respectively well above and below recommended thresholds for tolerance > .10 to .20 and VIF < 5 to 10.

Table 3 presents the regression coefficients of the two regression models, one without interactions and one introducing the conspicuous consumption × PCE interaction term. In the model without interaction, all variables have a significant influence on the dependent variable sustainable clothing purchase as proposed by H1 to H5. Conspicuous consumption ($\beta = .32, t = 9.18, p < .001$) and PCE ($\beta = .31, t = 7.66, p < .001$) have individually the strongest positive effect on purchase, significantly stronger than the significantly positive effects of environmental concern ($\beta = .13, t = 3.25, p < .001$) and trust in sustainable fashion brands ($\beta = .13, t = 3.80, p < .001$), as the nonoverlapping confidence intervals of the standardized regression coefficient β confirm. Perceived greenwashing has a negative effect on purchase ($\beta = -.08, t = -2.27, p = .02$).

To address the proposed moderating influence of PCE on the effect of conspicuous consumption motives on purchase (H6), we introduced the interaction term (conspicuous consumption × PCE) into the regression model. The regression values of all variables except conspicuous consumption and PCE varied only marginally with small nonsignificant increases. The strong interaction term confirmed the moderating influence ($\beta = .51, t = 3.81, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.25, 0.77]$). Indeed, the nonoverlapping confidence intervals confirmed that the interaction of conspicuous consumption with PCE had the strongest influence of all variables on the purchase of sustainable clothing. Conditional effect analysis showed that the effect of conspicuous consumption on purchase was lower at one standard deviation below the PCE mean value ($M - 1SD = 3.17, \beta = .28, t = 5.33, p < .001$) than at the mean value ($M = 4.50, \beta = .40, t = 9.25,$

$p < .001$) and higher at one standard deviation above the mean ($M + 1SD = 5.84, \beta = .51, t = 9.78, p < .001$). As an additional robustness check, we conducted the analysis by introducing gender and age as covariates. While gender did not affect purchasing, age had a small negative effect on purchase ($\beta = -.06, t = -2.04, p = .04$). Overall results varied only marginally by introducing the covariates. The effects of gender and age on purchase did also not interact with the effects of any of the other variables.

5 | DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study analyzes the degree to which conspicuous consumption, environmental concern, perceived consumer effectiveness, trust in sustainable clothing brands, and perceived greenwashing contribute to explaining the purchase of sustainable clothing. This research is the first to integrate these variables into a unifying framework and to examine their effects together on reported actual purchasing behavior. The results confirmed the effect of all proposed antecedents of purchasing and showed that conspicuous consumption motives and perceived consumer effectiveness have a stronger influence on purchases than the remaining variables. Indeed, the effect of conspicuous consumption was moderated by perceived consumer effectiveness, with the interaction of both variables having the strongest effect on the purchase of sustainable clothing. As theoretically proposed, the more participants in the study believed that their action will make a real difference for the environment, the more they believed that others feel the same, which is a prerequisite for conspicuous consumption to provide the expected motivational effect. Our research provides several theoretical contributions:

First, our findings reassess the importance of environmental concern as a behavioral antecedent. Most research on sustainable consumption and green consumer behavior highlights environmental concern and consciousness as one of the most significant antecedents

TABLE 3 Linear multiple regression analysis of antecedents of sustainable clothing purchase (regression models with and without the conspicuous consumption × PCE interaction term)

Factors	B	SE	β	T	Sig.	β LBCI	β UBCI	B	SE	β	T	Sig.	β LBCI	β UBCI
(Constant)	-.72	.31		-2.31	.02	-1.34	-.11	.85	.52		1.65	.10	-.06	.06
Conspicuous consumption	.40	.04	.32	9.18	<.001	.31	.48	.01	.11	.00	.05	.96	-.17	.18
Environmental concern	.15	.05	.13	3.25	<.001	.06	.23	.16	.04	.15	3.60	<.001	.07	.22
PCE	.38	.05	.31	7.66	<.001	.28	.48	.05	.10	.04	.53	.60	-.12	.20
Green trust	.17	.05	.13	3.80	<.001	.08	.26	.13	.05	.10	2.84	.01	.03	.17
Perceived greenwashing	-.11	.05	-.08	-2.27	.02	-.20	-.01	-.12	.05	-.09	-2.54	.01	-.15	-.02
Conspicuous × PCE								.09	.02	.51	3.81	<.001	.25	.77
R ²	.42							.43						

Note: Dependent variable, sustainable clothing purchase; B, unstandardized regression coefficient; SE, standard error; β , standardized coefficient; LBCI, lower bound confidence interval; UBCI, upper bound confidence interval.

of environmentally friendly purchases (e.g., Fryxell & Lo, 2003; Hustvedt & Dickson, 2009; Park & Lin, 2020; Prakash & Pathak, 2017; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021; Yarimoglu & Binboga, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). In our study, for the specific case of sustainable clothing, environmental consciousness had a significantly weaker influence than conspicuous consumption and perceived consumer effectiveness.

Second, we show that conspicuous consumption is one of the strongest drivers of sustainable fashion purchases. Thus, the purchase of sustainable clothing is more strongly associated with the benefits of a prosocial image than with the concern about the degradation of the environment. Our findings support the argument that the consumption of sustainable clothing is strongly associated with social meaning and values (Diddi et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2018; Şener et al., 2019). The consumption of sustainable clothing allows consumers to signal to others their contribution to the improvement of the common good environment. By showing that sustainable clothing plays a significant role as conspicuous displays, our study contributes to the stream of literature on conspicuous consumption motives as a driver of sustainable consumption (Ali et al., 2019; Amatulli et al., 2018; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Hammad et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; Policarpo & Aguiar, 2020).

Third, the moderation of the effect of conspicuous consumption by perceived consumer effectiveness is a novel finding. On the one hand, our results confirmed the relevance of PCE as described in the literature (Ellen et al., 1991; Jaiswal & Singh, 2018; Kinnear et al., 1974; Niedermeier et al., 2021; Roberts, 1996; Zhao et al., 2018). PCE is a crucial factor influencing sustainable clothing purchases. This finding indicates that the more consumers believe that purchasing sustainable clothing brands helps mitigate the environmental problems generated by the fashion industry, the more likely are they to consume sustainable clothing. On the other hand, our study is the first to propose and show that this belief does not only affect purchases directly but that it also constitutes a boundary condition for conspicuous consumption motives. Only when consumers perceive that sustainable clothing will make an actual environmental impact, they will be motivated to display their environmental engagement by purchasing these products. This finding makes a significant contribution to the literature on conspicuous consumption (e.g., Ali et al., 2019; Amatulli et al., 2018; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Hammad et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018) because this moderation mechanism has not been proposed previously.

Fourth, the negative effect of perceived greenwashing and the positive influence of trust in the sustainability of the brand together advance our knowledge of consumer responses to the authenticity of green marketing claims. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to address the effects of perceived greenwashing on reported purchases of sustainable clothing. Once consumers perceive green product claims to be vague or seemingly unlikely and develop doubts about marketing information or suspicions that the company is deploying greenwashing strategies, purchasing behavior is negatively affected. Trust in sustainable clothing brands is, therefore, a further important factor in determining purchasing behavior. This finding

extends research by Neumann et al. (2020), who found that trust is an antecedent of purchase intention in the fast fashion sector.

6 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our findings provide important insights for marketers of sustainable clothing, however, putting them into practice can be challenging. Manufacturers should highlight visually the sustainability of their clothing brand or line through style and sustainability labels but, at the same time, strictly avoid the impression of greenwashing. Making sustainable clothing more conspicuous can be achieved through differential style designs and visible sustainability labels and brands. Fashion designers will have to find differentiated fashion styles that are associated by target consumers with a more sustainable lifestyle but that, at the same time, resonate with their fashion preferences. There are a number of sustainable fashion brands pioneering such fashion styles. Also, brands and labels can display sustainability in a symbolic way through verbal slogans and symbols (e.g., H&M's "Conscious Choice" line). However, there is a risk involved in the use of sustainability brands and labels as they may be perceived as greenwashing, ultimately hurting the brand. To avoid the perception of greenwashing, companies should at all costs avoid making false, vague, or unsubstantiated sustainability statements (e.g., "protects the climate" or "contains recycled cotton"). Companies must provide exhaustive information justifying the increased sustainability of their garments. Whenever possible, clothing should display sustainability labels. While official labels exist for instance for organic farming, they are still scarce in the fashion industry. Some private certification standards exist, however, such as the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) for organic cotton, the Global Recycled Standard (GRS) for recycled products, or Certified B Corporations, which certify the sustainability efforts of the manufacturer. Sustainable clothing companies should consider adhering to the standards of these labels.

Making sure that consumers perceive that sustainable clothing makes a real environmental impact not only counteracts greenwashing perception, but it also, as our study shows, is a prerequisite for consumers' conspicuous consumption motives to trigger purchases. Because the effect of conspicuous consumption on purchasing depends on consumers' perceived environmental effectiveness, that is, their belief that they can contribute significantly to improving the situation of the environment, it is essential for marketers to strengthen perceived effectiveness. Recognized environmental labels and detailed information on the environmental impact of the fashion product help consumers to perceive they can make an impact on the situation of the environment through their purchase. Marketers should provide information on the impact an individual consumer has by purchasing a specific sustainable product, for instance, in terms of carbon footprint, materials recycled, or water saved, in comparison with less sustainable conventional clothing products. Consumers seem to perceive that, for others to perceive their environmental commitment, they must first believe themselves that they are making a noteworthy contribution to the environment. Sustainable fashion

marketers can then in addition trigger conspicuous consumption motives through advertising campaigns, highlighting the idea that wearing sustainable clothing allows consumers to show their environmental commitment to others, enhancing status and popularity among like-minded peers.

Providing trustworthy, accurate environmental information has the further effect of nurturing consumers' trust in the fashion brand. As our study shows, trust in the sustainability of the brand also determines purchasing. Fashion marketers should, however, go a step further and, instead of concentrating only on the environmental attributes of their products, develop their overall corporate credibility by showing through fact-based trustworthy corporate communication that environmental and social sustainability, rather than just a marketing gimmick, are a central part of the company's core values.

Since self-regulation of the industry on greenwashing seems to be not sufficiently effective, consumer policymakers should engage more actively in addressing this problem. Further regulation of sustainability claims in the clothing industry is necessary to avoid consumers being exposed to unfounded sustainability claims. Official sustainability labels similar to the organic food labels in the food industry are needed to provide consumers with reliable information.

The findings of this research have also significant implications for consumers. Consumers should be aware that a significant part of their behavior may be driven by processes of which they are not immediately aware. Consumers may feel the urge to purchase sustainable clothing but may not be conscious that they are being motivated by the need to signal their attitudes and beliefs to others. They may also be motivated to abstain from the purchase of sustainable clothing because they suspect greenwashing. Instead of a general suspicion of the clothing industry, consumers should analyze carefully the sustainability information provided by fashion brands on a case-to-case basis. Some of the sustainable clothing manufacturers seem to be putting a sincere effort into creating a more sustainable product offer.

7 | LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the representative consumer sample contributes to this study's validity and external representativeness, the cross-sectional character of the data limits causal and directional inferences. Also, the analysis is based on a multiple regression approach, which has some limitations compared with other analytic methods such as structural equation modeling. Future research should address these limitations through experimental designs, in particular, experimental field studies that maintain the external representativeness of results. Some of the participants may have been not aware and conscious of greenwashing before being asked to rate items related to this question in the questionnaire. To avoid such an effect, future research should intend to measure greenwashing perception with open questions that avoid prompting greenwashing. A future mixed method approach, which

combines findings from qualitative interviews with quantitative survey data, may extend the theoretical and practical contributions of this study.

We did not instruct participants about specific brands or styles of sustainable fashion. We, therefore, assessed the effect of conspicuous motives in the context of how the participants perceived the impact of their consuming sustainable fashion on others. Different sustainable brands and sustainable clothing styles may be more conspicuous than others and affect conspicuous consumption. While the variables analyzed explained 43% of the variance in actual sustainable clothing purchases in the sample, there is still a significant part not explained by our model. Consumer preferences regarding the specific style and appearance of sustainable clothing may explain a further significant part of the variance in consumers' purchase of these garments. Future research should address the studied relationships experimentally, exposing participants to specific sustainable clothing brands and styles.

Also, the specific cultural context in which this study was conducted should be considered when interpreting its findings. The data were collected in a developed Western country. Conspicuous consumption may be particularly relevant as a driver of sustainable consumption in newly industrialized countries—especially among their rapidly growing middle classes (Hammad et al., 2019). Future research should replicate our findings in other cultural and international environments.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF CONSUMER RESEARCH ON SUSTAINABLE CLOTHING

Authors (year)	Theoretical base	Method	Samples	Main findings
Cocquyt et al. (2020)	Sharing economy	Mixed-method design; online survey using conjoint analysis	N = 1512 participants. Five focus groups	<p>Sharing clothes on a platform is a new, potentially more sustainable, way of consuming clothes.</p> <p>Potential users prefer small clothing share platforms with the possibility of participation in decision-making, but without the commitment of shareholding.</p> <p>Women prefer platforms with dominant idealistic, non-financial, and social goals; men prefer platforms focusing on financial goals.</p>
Colucci & Vecchi (2021)	Circular economy business model	Qualitative research, using multiple case studies	Four case studies from the Italian fashion industry: Candiani denim, WRÁD, dress you can, and Gucci	<p>There is a beneficial relationship between sustainability and circular economy (CE). Additionally, CE practices can constitute a source of competitive advantage.</p> <p>Sustainable business models will replace the dominant unsustainable ones.</p>
Didi et al. (2019)	Behavioral reasoning theory	Qualitative research	Six focus groups with 41 young adult consumers	<p>Young adult consumers engage in sustainable clothing consumption behaviors, primarily because of perceived value, sustainability, commitment, uniqueness, and lifestyle changes. The motive for not engaging in these behaviors included a perceived lack of variety/style, budget constraints, skepticism, lack of knowledge/skills, emotions attached to consumption, perceived lack of availability, and consumers' self-indulgent behavior.</p>
D'Souza et al. (2015)	Theory of reasoned action, social dilemma theory, and behavior control theory	Survey, PLS technique	N = 184 male consumers randomly selected	<p>Environmental concern, sustainable pricing, and sustainable commitment, positively influence men's purchase intentions for eco-clothing.</p> <p>Perceived consumer effectiveness and faith in others were not found to be significant moderators.</p>
Elf et al. (2022)	Circular economy business model	Longitudinal interview-based study	An initial screening process surveying 144 fashion businesses, 48 enterprises were selected for further qualitative inquiry through semi-structured in-depth interviews	<p>The distinctive development and use of dynamic capabilities enable micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to act in agile ways, allowing them to introduce, test, and advance circular economy solutions.</p> <p>MSMEs working well and successfully remain open to reform, indicating a positive outlook toward the future and the ability to face changes.</p>
Han et al. (2017)	Heider's balance theory	Multi-method participatory action research	A two-stage iterative: (i) 24 university students were assigned to four focus groups, (ii) participatory action research with eight participants	<p>Consumers' limited awareness and knowledge about sustainable fashion products may promote negative sentiments toward sustainable fashion product consumption (SFPC).</p> <p>Staged experiences develop individualized competencies that may guide SFPC decisions and choices.</p> <p>Developing and staging consumer-centered experiences help balance the psychological imbalance occurring in the attitude-behavior gap between sustainability concerns and SFPC behaviors.</p>
Hill & Lee (2015)	Brand-extension theory	Online survey	N = 598 participants	<p>In analyzing consumer perceptions of a potential sustainable line extension introduced by a specific fast-fashion retailer, the results confirm that brand-cause fit and brand-extension fit significantly predicted brand extension success.</p>

Authors (year)	Theoretical base	Method	Samples	Main findings
Hustvedt & Dickson (2009)	Theory of planned behavior	Mail survey	N = 377 effective questionnaires	The consumers' level of knowledge about the brand and its causes should also be considered when presenting sustainability as fitting with a brand. Consumers that use organic cotton are motivated by their beliefs about the beneficial outcomes of the purchase, for themselves, the organic industry, and the environment. They had strong self-identity as socially responsible consumers.
Jacobs et al. (2018)	The value-attitude-behavior hierarchy	Online survey	N = 1085 German women recruited via an online panel	A positive attitude toward social-ecological clothing standards, biospheric and altruistic values, as well as an affinity to online and catalog shopping enhance sustainable clothing purchases. Egoistic and hedonic values hinder sustainable clothing purchase behavior. No significant effects of the suspected barriers—fashion consciousness and price sensitivity—have been confirmed.
Joergens (2006)	Ethical fashion consumption	Focus groups as a qualitative method and questionnaires as a quantitative method.	Focus groups were conducted in Frankfurt, Germany, and Manchester, England. In Germany 64 and in England 53 completed questionnaires	Findings demonstrate little evidence that ethical issues have any effect on consumers' fashion purchase behavior. When buying fashion products, consumers are more interested in their fashion needs than the needs of others involved in the apparel supply chain.
Neumann et al. (2020)	Ethical consumerism, theory of reasoned action	Structural equation modeling; online survey	N = 216 international consumers	Perceptions of social responsibility directly affected consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion brands. Consumer attitude and perceived consumer effectiveness did not predict purchase intention. Consumers' trust is a powerful mechanism to affect purchase intention toward a brand's sustainable clothing lines. Although previous literature has shown general attitude could positively influence consumers' purchase intention, we failed to find support for this connection.
Park & Lin (2020)	Theory of reasoned action, brand value, signaling theory	T-test analysis and logistic regression analysis	N = 217 young Korean consumers	Consumer attitude is a weak or insignificant predictor of green fashion buying. Moreover, despite having the highest levels of awareness of ethical fashion, younger people have been found to consume fewer ethical products. Perceived consumer effectiveness or income was more related to actual purchase behavior of second-hand fashion products, while subjective norm or education played important roles in purchasing upcycled fashion goods.
Rausch & Kopplin (2021)	Theory of reasoned action	Partial least squares structural equation modeling; online survey across multiple social media channels—Qualtrics	N = 464	Attitude toward sustainable clothing has the highest impact on purchase intention. Consumers' greenwashing concerns negatively influence this relationship. Perceived environmental knowledge has a positive impact on purchase intention for these products. Moreover, perceived economic risk has no significant effect on the intention-behavior relation.
Şener et al. (2019)	Slow fashion consumption	Structural equation modeling	N = 725 students pursuing higher education in Turkey and Kazakhstan	Slow fashion supports local production. Consumers who intend to purchase slow-fashion clothing are willing to pay higher prices than for other products. Clothes that have features of localism and exclusivity are perceived as more valuable.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	352	58.7
	Male	246	41.0
	Other	2	.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
	Total	600	100