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CUT THROUGH THE GREENWASHING
STRATEGIES FOR AUTHENTIC SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION

Perceived greenwashing refers to consumers' ability to identify deceptive green marketing practices in product advertisements. This study explores how perceived greenwashing impacts consumers' willingness to pay for fashion products. Using a qualitative approach and cross-case analysis, we evaluated data from approximately 2,500 Gen Z and Millennial respondents in 2023, including both Italians and expats living in Italy. Our findings reveal that consumers' perception of greenwashing significantly influences their behavior and willingness to pay. To address this, we propose a managerial tool to assist brands in crafting credible sustainability claims, mitigating greenwashing risks, and reinforcing authentic sustainability messages.

GREENWASHING//SUSTAINABILITY//FASHION INDUSTRY//GREEN MARKETING//THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR

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INTRODUCTION

Growing environmental awareness among consumers is driving higher demand for eco-friendly (green) products (Pimonenko et al., 2020; Zhang and Sun, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). These goods, which aim to enhance quality of life, require rigorous, continuous assessments (Baines et al., 2013). Green manufacturing techniques are considered a promising way to improve the environmental impact of production (Nukmana et al., 2017). But customers' willingness to pay a premium for eco-labeled goods has led some companies to make false claims in order to gain a competitive advantage, a practice commonly referred to as greenwashing (Nguyen et al., 2019; Volschenk et al., 2022).

Greenwashing equates to misleading consumers on a company's environmentally friendly practices or eco-labeling (Parguel et al., 2011; Yu et al., 2024), often by falsely claiming sustainable processes and practices (Mukherjee and Ghosh, 2014; More, 2019). Greenwashing is prevalent in the fashion industry, where companies promote sustainability claims without making concrete improvements in recycling materials or implementing take-back programs (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Tettamanzi et al., 2023). Such claims can inflate the perceived greenness of products (Huang et al., 2020). As a result, greenwashing significantly influences consumer behavior, affecting their willingness to pay for fashion items (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022).

While greenwashing has been investigated extensively (Eng et al., 2021; Guerreiro and Pacheco, 2021; Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022), much of the research has focused on definitions and characteristics of this practice. Some studies analyze whether environmental claims positively influence consumer perceptions (Magnier and Schoormans, 2017; Parguel et al., 2015; Samaraweera et al., 2020), but fewer examine how greenwashing tactics influence consumer choices (Boncinelli et al., 2023; Dutta-Powell et al., 2023). Despite its managerial relevance, a comprehensive exploration of the effects of greenwashing is still lacking in the literature.

Our investigation into the phenomenon is based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985), which examines the determinants of human behavior. By applying TPB, managers can develop sustainability strategies that guide consumer behavior while safeguarding the brand's reputation. Our research introduces two key novelties. First, it examines consumer perceptions of greenwashing through the lens of TPB, focusing on Gen Z and Millennial demographics that prioritize environmental sustainability. Second, it centers on the fashion industry, an arena where sustainability claims are widespread and frequently subject to criticism. This leads us to the research question: **"How can the fashion industry effectively combat greenwashing practices given the principles of TPB?"** To answer this question, the study investigates the relationship between greenwashing perceptions, TPB components, and consumers' willingness to pay for fashion products. We also present a managerial tool designed to minimize the negative effects of greenwashing in product communication.

This paper contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it deepens our understanding of greenwashing (Huang and Chen, 2015; Morici and Pogutz, 2021) and TPB (Ma et al., 2024; Paul et al., 2016; Yadav and Pathak, 2016) by analyzing the interplay between TPB components and willingness to pay. Second, it is consistent with recent European initiatives aimed at combating misleading sustainability claims in the fashion industry. For example, the European Proposal for a Directive on Green Claims (European Commission, 2023) mandates companies to validate environmental claims using standardized methodologies. Similarly, the European Proposal for a Directive on Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition (European Commission, 2022a) tackles unfair commercial practices that prevent consumers from making informed choices. Such measures are critical in reducing greenwashing.

The remainder of the paper is organized in the following order: a review of the literature on greenwashing and TPB; the methodology of the study, including the research context and data collection process; the findings and results of the analysis; a discussion on these findings and how they address the research question in light of the existing literature; theoretical and practical implications for managers and policymakers, and how the research supports them. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Greenwashing Insight, or perceived greenwashing, refers to consumers' ability to detect deceptive green marketing practices in product advertisements (Chen and Chang, 2013; Ma et al., 2024). This perception arises from a rational cognitive mechanism that discerns false green claims. Despite the prevalence of vague appeals in green advertising, researchers have often overlooked their impact on attitudinal outcomes (Baum, 2012; Segev et al., 2016; Schmuck et al., 2018).

According to Nyilasy et al. (2014), greenwashing poses serious ethical risks to various stakeholders by distorting positive environmental claims to divert their (Xiang et al., 2024). Recently, scholars have identified greenwashing as a practice that erodes consumer trust and purchasing behavior (Gosselt et al., 2019; Kudłak, 2024; Pizzetti et al., 2022).

As societal concern about environmental issues grows, businesses are under pressure to adopt greener practices to maintain their reputation and satisfy stakeholders. However, not all environmental initiatives are successful; some may even backfire (Berrone et al., 2017). Ethical companies should avoid greenwashing and instead focus on authentic sustainability practices (Wu et al., 2024).

It is equally important to understand how greenwashing affects managerial decisions and how managerial values or green attitudes influence decision-making in general (Ferrón-Vílchez et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2024). Managers must monitor consumer perceptions of green claims in fashion items and proactively address this issue (Lo, 2021).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a foundational framework for predicting environmental behavior and studying consumer willingness to engage in eco-friendly activities (Guo et al., 2018). What's more, TPB's flexibility allows researchers to enhance its explanatory power by incorporating elements from other models (Ma et al., 2024). According to this theory, consumers' perception of green claims has a significant impact on their behavior.

Specifically, in the TPB model, three key variables – attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control – shape "behavioral intention," which in turn influences behavior (Yadav and Pathak, 2016). Individuals' attitudes reflect their positive or negative evaluations of behavior. A subjective norm represents perceived social pressure to engage in or avoid a given behavior, while perceived behavioral control indicates confidence in executing a behavior (Wu et al., 2024). These variables have appreciable influence on both the willingness to pay for a product and sustainable behavior. In fact, as environmental awareness grows, the willingness to pay for products perceived as offering excellent environmental value increases (Berrone et al., 2017).

Prior studies (e.g., Diddi et al., 2019; Koay et al., 2024) have explored the relationship between TPB and consumer intentions, finding that consumers are likely to invest in products they perceive as environmentally beneficial (Jägel et al., 2012). Koay et al. (2022) highlight that attitudes toward buying are shaped by emotional and environmental values, emphasizing the role of eco-consciousness and affective attachment in consumer decision-making.

By leveraging TPB, managers can better predict consumer behavior, directing them toward eco-friendly products. Transparent and authentic green strategies can enhance product loyalty, strengthen brand image, and boost sales of genuinely sustainable products (Delmas and Burbano, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the proposed model based on these insights and concepts. Supporting this, Paul et al. (2016) demonstrate that attitude and perceived behavioral control are critical drivers of buying intentions.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The present study targets Millennials and Gen Zers residing in Italy in 2023, including both Italian nationals and international residents. We collected data via a structured questionnaire administered to approximately 2,500 respondents. Participants included students attending courses at SDA Bocconi School of Management in Milan and employees from PwC[1].

As noted in prior research (e.g., Baum, 2020; Wu et al., 2024), Millennials and Gen Z represent the

1 The Authors would like to thank PwC Italy - particularly Omar Cadamuro, Partner PwC Italy - for the co-development of the Circular fashion survey on New Generations by PwC and SDA Bocconi School of Management for the Monitor for Circular Fashion Report 2023 (Rinaldi et al, 2023).

future consumer base and therefore are a particularly relevant focus for this study. These generations demonstrate heightened awareness and concern regarding environmental challenges, making them critical to understanding and shaping sustainable consumption behaviors.

Research procedure

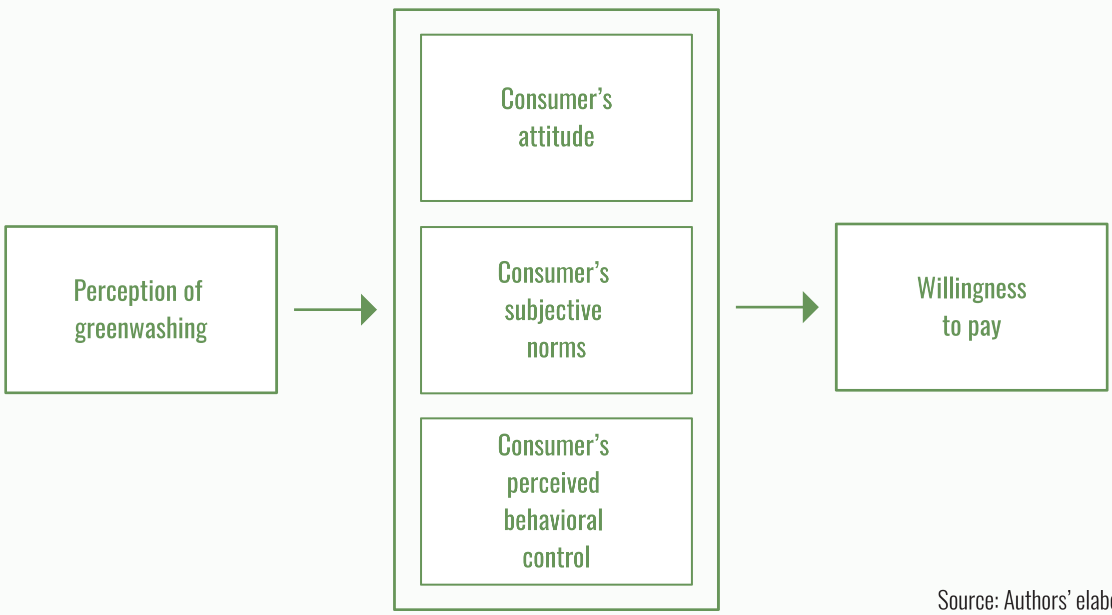
"How can the fashion industry effectively combat greenwashing practices, considering the principles of TPB?" This is our main research question, which we addressed by adopting a methodology aimed at understanding the complex interplay between how consumers perceive greenwashing and their willingness to pay for eco-friendly products.

The study is based on a qualitative approach, implementing a coding method to gain context-specific insights. To analyze the quantitative data, deductive coding was applied using a predetermined set of themes derived from existing literature. This ensured that the analysis focused on key issues already identified in prior research, thereby supporting the analytical generalization of findings (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019). This structured methodology systematically categorizes the data, reinforcing the reliability of our findings and facilitating the generalization of results across contexts.

Following the approach outlined by Miller and Crabtree (1999), we applied deductive coding to reveal nuanced insights relevant to the research question. Thirteen variables were identified from the questionnaire based on predefined survey items. These were categorized as structured propositions (theoretical statements) and verbal codes (direct expressions from participants). The variables were organized according to the structure of the interviews and, informed by the theoretical framework, were segmented into three main categories: *Consumer Attitudes*, *Consumer Subjective Norms*, and *Consumer Perceived Behavioral Control*.

Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted, comparing patterns across responses from approximately 2,500 participants who

FIGURE 1. THE RESEARCH MODEL



Source: Authors' elaboration

completed the survey between May and July 2023. The coding method in the cross-case analysis involved identifying relevant segments in the survey (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019), assigning numerical codes (e.g., 1, 2, ..., n), and assessing values as either valid (1) or null (0). Final interpretations were drawn from the distribution of valid responses across 17 cases, using quartile percentages to define the density of responses. The ranges were classified as:

- Low: 1-625;
- Moderate: 626-1250;
- High: 1250-1875;
- Very high: 1876-2500.

This methodological approach allowed us to

TABLE 1. VARIABLES (CODES) FOR THE INTERVIEW SURVEY

Classification of factors	Variables	Questions	Description of Variables	Code
Consumer's Attitude	Koay et al. (2024)	Q1: Do you trust a fashion product more if there is transparency about how your personal data is used?	Transparency about personal data use in buying a fashion product	#01
		Q2: When you consistently buy a fashion product known for its sustainable practices, is it because you can always rely on that brand to meet your expectations?	Expectations when consistently buying a fashion product known for its sustainable practices	#02
		Q3: When you buy a fashion product, how much do you consider the fact that the brand engages in concrete activities to protect the environment and people?	Expectations in buying a fashion product that protects the environment and people	#03
		Q4: When you buy a fashion product, how much do you consider the features of the in-store shopping experience you have?	Consumer's expectations about the features of the shopping experience	#04
Consumer's Subjective Norms	Diddi et al. (2019) Koay et al. (2022)	Q5: Do positive reviews from the social media make you more likely to buy a fashion product, even if you suspect the brand might be exaggerating its environmental benefits?	Positive reviews from social media when buying a fashion product	#05
		Q6: Do you think your friends or family would approve of you buying a product with recycled packaging?	Positive environmental results in packaging a fashion product	#06
		Q7: Do you feel pressured to buy environmentally friendly fashion products?	Feeling pressured to buy environmentally friendly fashion products	#07
		Q8: Do you think people will judge you if you don't buy environmentally friendly fashion products?	People's judgement about buying environmentally friendly fashion products	#08
		Q9: Do you think most people you know are concerned about the environmental impact of fashion products?	Concern about the environmental impact of fashion products	#09
Consumer's Perceived Behavioral Control	Koay et al. (2022)	Q10: Do you consider the socio-environmental impact of developing new fashion products when deciding if a company is sustainable?	Socio-environmental impact of fashion product development	#10
		Q11: In addition to wanting the product, how much would your ability to afford a higher price influence your decision to buy an eco-friendly fashion product?	Ability to afford a higher price to buy an eco-friendly fashion product	#11
		Q12: Do quality concerns prevent you from purchasing a sustainable fashion product?	Quality concerns when purchasing a sustainable fashion product	#12
		Q13: Do you believe that the availability of environmentally friendly fashion products is sufficient to meet your needs?	Availability of environmentally friendly fashion products to meet the consumer's needs	#13

Source: Authors' elaboration

systematically exam the factors that shape consumer perception of greenwashing and their impact on consumer willingness to pay for eco-friendly products. As a result, the study offers valuable insights for addressing greenwashing in the fashion industry through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior.

RESULTS

Within-case analysis
In the first phase of our analysis, we collected demographic data on the respondents. The results indicate that the sample population is equally divided between the two genders. Figure 2 shows the respondents' distribution across different generations.

Cross-case results
In this section, we present a comprehensive discussion of the survey results and the thirteen variables that we identified. We implemented a qualitative coding method, grounded in the research procedure and variable classification, to examine the exploratory survey. Based on the cross-case analysis, we delineated three TPB components:

- Consumer attitudes (codes #01 to #04);
- Consumer subjective norms (codes #05 to #09);
- Consumer perceived behavioral control (codes #10 to #13).

The variables contributing to these categories are explained in Table 2, which provides a summary of each one and its respective function. A detailed analysis helps clarify how each category of TPB influences the perception of greenwashing and the willingness to pay for fashion products.

Consumer attitude (codes #01 to #04)
As shown in Table 2, the variables based on the research question are designed to investigate how inclined consumers are to purchase fashion products. The responses to codes #01 to #03 are predominantly positive (79.44%, 75.16%, and 55.44%, respectively), indicating that consumers generally hold favorable attitudes towards buying fashion items that are transparent about data usage, sustainability, and environmental and social practices. In other words, customers prefer fashion products that provide transparent and honest disclosures regarding data utilization and sustainability efforts. Transparency is seen as an ethical standard, and it plays a pivotal role in countering the phenomenon of greenwashing. When a product shows a genuine commitment to sustainability, it helps ease consumer concerns about being misled on this issue. The positive survey responses suggest that consumers are more willing to pay a premium for sustainable products when they trust the brand's sustainability claims.

The responses to code #04 denote a moderately positive view (40.96%) of in-store features that enhance the shopping experience for fashion products. This suggests that while such aspects can positively influence buying decisions, they do so to a limited extent. Because the impact of in-store features is only moderate, they may not be influential enough to significantly sway purchasing decisions on their own. However, if these characteristics create an illusion of sustainability, consumers may become more vulnerable to greenwashing.

Overall, positive consumer attitudes toward purchasing fashion products are associated with lower perceptions of greenwashing and greater willingness to pay. Understanding these consumer attitudes can help develop strategies that enhance transparency and highlight genuine sustainability efforts, ultimately mitigating the risk of greenwashing and encouraging consumers to spend on fashion items.

Consumer subjective norms component (codes #05 to #09)
The survey results in Table 2 indicate that subjective norms – meaning the perceived social pressure to engage in or avoid certain behaviors – substantially shape consumers' intentions and actions when it comes to purchasing fashion products. The percentage of positive responses to code #05 (52.20%) reflects this aspect of the Theory of Planned Behavior,

FIGURE 2. GENERATIONS OF RESPONDENTS

	Millennials	GenZ	Boomers + X
♀	49%	58%	45%
♂	51%	42%	55%

Source: Authors' elaboration

showing that positive social influence may, for some consumers, outweigh concerns about greenwashing. In other words, the need for social approval and the desire to fit in can drive consumers' willingness to pay for fashion items, even if they suspect that sustainability claims might be exaggerated.

The responses to codes #06 to #08 (32.96%, 40.12%, and 47.68%, respectively) show moderately positive attitudes as far as the influence of family and friends on purchasing decisions. This suggests that while social input matters, it is not the primary driver of consumer choices; other factors likely play a more prominent role. Subjective norms related to packaging may help consumers recognize greenwashing, which in turn can affect their willingness to pay for eco-friendly products. Although many consumers report feeling social pressure to buy eco-friendly fashion items, this does not necessarily reflect a strong personal preference. Consumers appear to be more open to paying for such products when they perceive the environmental claims as credible and the benefits as real. While social pressure does shape behavior, it is unclear whether this pressure stems from genuine environmental concern or skepticism around greenwashing.

The percentage of positive responses to code #09 (65.12%) indicates that most consumers believe their social circle places importance on the environmental impact of fashion products. This powerful subjective norm can prompt individual purchasing behavior. When consumers perceive a strong social norm around environmental awareness, they are more likely to pay for eco-friendly fashion products. However, it should be noted that greenwashing practices may undermine this effect. If consumers begin to doubt the authenticity of sustainability claims – especially as demand and willingness to pay increase – their trust and motivation to support sustainable products may decline.

Overall, these findings highlight the major role of subjective norms in shaping consumer behavior towards sustainable fashion products, emphasizing the need for transparent, genuine sustainability claims to maintain consumer trust and willingness to pay.

Consumer perceived behavioral control component (codes #10 to #13)

The data presented in Table 2 show that perceived behavioral control (defined as confidence in the ability to perform a certain behavior) is a major motivator in a consumer's intention to engage in sustainable fashion purchasing. In other words, the more confident a consumer feels in their ability to shop for sustainable fashion, the more likely they actually intend to do so.

The highly positive responses to codes #10 to #12 (72.88%, 56.44%, and 68.52%, respectively) demonstrate that a sizeable majority of respondents believe that fashion companies can develop more sustainable, ethical products. As consumers become more cognizant of the impact of their willingness to pay, this strongly perceived behavioral control reduces their susceptibility to greenwashing. Consequently, consumers are more inclined to purchase sustainable fashion products and are willing to pay a premium for items that align with their sustainability expectations. This suggests that consumers are willing to pay higher prices for eco-friendly options, provided that the claims are genuine. However, if a company's green attributes are found to be the result of greenwashing, consumers may be less inclined to pay a premium once the truth comes out.

Additionally, the data reveal that quality concerns are a sizeable barrier to purchasing sustainable fashion products, which is directly related to perceived behavioral control. Consumers may be reluctant to invest in sustainable fashion products due to concerns about quality and potential greenwashing. Instead, they are more likely to pay

TABLE 2. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

#Code	Variable considered by consumer	Overall	Positive responses	
			No.	%
#01	Transparency about personal data use in buying a fashion product	Very high	1986	79.44%
#02	Expectations when consistently buying a fashion product known for its sustainable practices	Very high	1879	75.16%
#03	Expectations when buying a fashion product that protects the environment and people	High	1386	55.44%
#04	Expectations of the shopping experience	Moderate	1024	40.96%
#05	Positive reviews from social media in buying a fashion product	High	1305	52.20%
#06	Achieving positive environmental results in packaging of fashion products	Moderate	824	32.96%
#07	Feeling pressured to buy an environmentally friendly fashion product	Moderate	1003	40.12%
#08	People's judgement about buying environmentally friendly fashion products	Moderate	1192	47.68%
#09	Concern about the environmental impact of fashion products	High	1628	65.12%
#10	Socio-environmental impact of fashion product development	High	1822	72.88%
#11	Ability to afford a higher price to buy an eco-friendly fashion product	High	1411	56.44%
#12	Quality concerns when purchasing a sustainable fashion product	High	1713	68.52%
#13	The availability of environmentally friendly fashion products to meet consumer needs	Moderate	988	39.52%

Source: Authors' elaboration

for sustainable products if they are confident that these products are of comparable or superior quality compared to conventional alternatives.

The response to code #13 is moderately positive (39.52%), suggesting that while consumers feel they have some control over their choices regarding green products, this control is not absolute. If consumers suspect that a company is exaggerating its eco-friendly practices, they may feel misled and less confident in their ability to make a positive environmental impact through their purchases. Higher perceived behavioral control typically leads to greater willingness to pay for sustainable products, provided that consumers trust the authenticity of the claims and are assured of the product's quality.

In summary, consumers are more willing to pay for sustainable fashion when they feel confident in their ability to make informed choices. Clear, honest sustainability practices help build that confidence and mitigate the effects of greenwashing.

DISCUSSION

A salient line of investigation is how consumers' perceptions of green claims affect both their purchasing decisions and their willingness to pay, particularly for fashion products. In this vein, the findings of this paper highlight the importance for company managers to consider consumer attitudes carefully, as doing so can help prevent greenwashing in marketing strategies. This, in turn, supports efforts to boost sales through genuine environmental responsibility. By offering truly sustainable fashion products, companies can contribute to a positive cycle that advances the triple bottom line – people, planet, and profit (Elkingtion, 1994).

Figure 3 gives a summary of the results and key indicators for each variable, useful information for managers and policymakers. The consumer attitude component, which includes codes #01 through #04, shows that transparency builds trust. Indeed, consumers vastly prefer products that are transparent about their data practices. This transparency also contributes to consumer welfare while offering strategic advantages for businesses. What's more, transparency is a regulatory imperative for policymakers seeking to uphold consumer rights and cultivate a robust fashion industry. Consumers also value products that consistently deliver on sustainability promises, and they consider environmental and social impacts when purchasing fashion (Koay et al., 2022). Companies that invest in concrete environmental and social initiatives can gain an ample competitive advantage. Communicating sustainability initiatives and their impact can substantially boost product loyalty by effectively managing consumer expectations (Wu et al., 2024). Therefore, it is imperative that policies ensure the implementation of consistent, sustainable practices, and transparently communicate these efforts to consumers.

The importance of in-store features in the selection of fashion products remains high despite the many influences on consumer purchasing decisions. Strategic investment in developing compelling, informative in-store environments can significantly impact consumer choices. This means that policies supporting the development and upkeep of physical retail spaces, especially in the fashion industry, continue to be extremely relevant. In addition, codes #05 through #09, reflecting consumer subjective norms, highlight a growing consumer awareness and concern for sustainability. Companies can leverage this trend to promote sustainable practices in the fashion industry, helping to build a more responsible fashion sector while enhancing brand loyalty and appeal among eco-conscious consumers (Koay et al., 2024). Positive social media reviews also go a long way to inform fashion purchasing decisions, even as skepticism around environmental claims persists. To instill consumer confidence, policymakers should prioritize both consumer protection and promoting authentic sustainability practices. For their part, companies can strengthen consumer trust by offering products with recycled packaging and by running educational campaigns to address common misconceptions (Khatami et al., 2023).

Finally, based on responses related to the consumer perceived behavioral control component, (codes #10 through #13) we find that consumers are willing to pay a premium for eco-friendly fashion products and prioritize product quality when considering sustainable options. To maintain a positive reputation while appealing to environmentally conscious consumers, companies must make every effort to minimize the negative socio-environmental impacts associated with new fashion products. This includes investing in higher quality materials, refining production processes to improve durability, and effectively disseminating information about quality standards and sustainability practices to foster consumer confidence (Diddi et al., 2019). Finally, championing innovation in sustainability can drive the development of more environmentally friendly and socially responsible products.

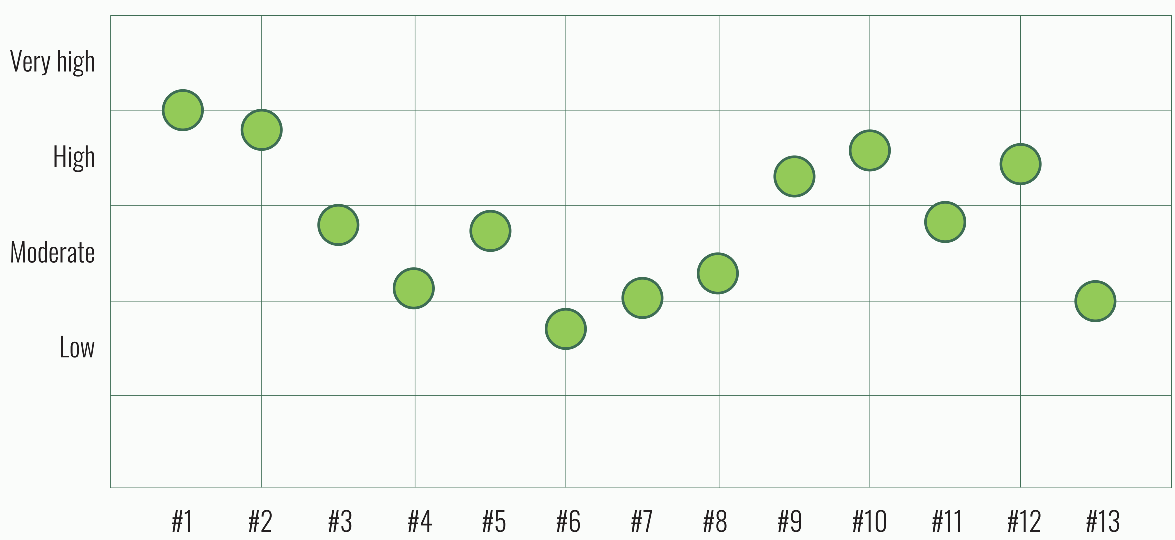
IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical implications

This study has several theoretical implications. The current literature contributes to a better understanding of greenwashing from a marketing perspective. Prior research efforts (e.g., Berrone et al., 2017; Diddi et al., 2019; Koay et al., 2022; Koay et al., 2024) have highlighted the pressing need to address the specific impact of consumers' perceptions of greenwashing on their behavior – and how this ultimately affects their willingness to pay for fashion products. However, further clarification is necessary. Our study addresses this gap by taking a novel approach: examining how greenwashing perceptions interact with each of the three components of TPB – attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

The literature review reveals that emotional and environmental values influence consumer attitudes toward fashion products, underscoring the

FIGURE 3. SUMMARIZING THE RESULTS BASED ON ALL VARIABLES



Source: Authors' elaboration

role of affective attachment and eco-consciousness in shaping consumer behavior (Koay et al., 2022). Building on this perspective, our findings examine how consumers' perceptions of greenwashing affect their willingness to pay for sustainable fashion. This study also responds to prior scholarly calls for deeper investigation into greenwashing (e.g., Berrone et al., 2017; Koay et al., 2022), focusing on Generation Z, an increasingly influential consumer group (Baum, 2020). Furthermore, our results align with more recent literature (Kudłak, 2024; Lo, 2021) emphasizing the role of ethical business practices in reducing greenwashing, particularly through the lens of TPB and its key components.

Indeed, this study reinforces the relevance of TPB in understanding consumer responses to green claims, demonstrating that its three core components significantly affect how rigorously such claims are evaluated (Yadav and Swaroop Pathak, 2016). For instance, customers are more likely to scrutinize a company's environmental claims and seek supporting evidence before purchasing when they believe that their social circle values eco-friendly options. These findings suggest that the TPB model could benefit from further refinement to account for the moderating role of skepticism toward green marketing. By interpreting our results through the TPB lens, we highlight how each of its components contributes to customers' willingness to pay (Ma et al., 2024).

Managerial implications

There are several managerial implications stemming from this study. First, transparency and trust (linked to the consumer attitude component of TPB) emerge as critical factors. In this vein, the results associated with codes #01 to #04 reveal that transparency in data practices and sustainability claims significantly enhances consumer trust. What's more, higher levels of transparency are directly correlated with stronger consumer preferences for fashion products. This means that managers should prioritize transparent communication about sustainability practices and data usage. Doing so not only boosts consumer trust but also offers strategic advantages, including deeper brand loyalty and more robust competitive positioning. All in all, effective communication of sustainability initiatives can positively influence consumer expectations and product loyalty.

Second, in-store features remain a persuasive, though moderate, factor in consumer purchasing decisions, as evidenced by code #04. Engaging, well-designed, and informative in-store environments can meaningfully shape consumer behavior. Based on this, companies should strategically enhance in-store experiences to appeal to consumers. Specifically, effective in-store communication of sustainability practices can mitigate greenwashing concerns and affect purchasing behavior.

Third, social influence and consumer awareness (aligned with the subjective norms component of TPB) represent another key managerial consideration. Findings (codes #05 to #09) reflect growing consumer awareness around sustainability, with positive social influences, such as favorable reviews and endorsements, significantly impacting purchasing decisions, even amid skepticism toward green claims. From a managerial standpoint, companies can harness this awareness by actively promoting sustainable practices, developing a strong social media presence, and engaging in educational campaigns that can strengthen brand loyalty and attract eco-conscious consumers. Additionally, creating supportive conditions for eco-friendly products (such as using recycled packaging and correcting misconceptions through clear communication) can reinforce consumer trust and preference.

Finally, perceived behavioral control and quality assurance (linked to the perceived behavioral control component of TPB and reflected in codes #10 to #13) emerge as critical drivers of consumer behavior. This finding indicates that consumers are willing to pay a premium for eco-friendly fashion products, provided they perceive the products to be of high quality. By the same token, concerns about product quality and the authenticity of environmental claims can undermine this willingness. The implication of this observation is that companies seeking to maintain a positive reputation and to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers should prioritize shrinking the socio-environmental impact of their products. This includes investing in high-quality, durable materials and optimizing production processes to meet sustainability goals. Clear communication about quality standards and sustainability practices is also essential for building consumer confidence. Additionally, promoting innovation in sustainability can further support the development of environmentally and socially responsible fashion products.

Based on the above, the summary recommendations for managers would be to enhance transparency in sustainability claims, invest in compelling in-store features, leverage social influence, and ensure high product quality to build consumer trust and loyalty. By addressing these key areas, companies can better navigate the complexities of consumer skepticism and greenwashing, ultimately driving sales and fostering a more sustainable fashion industry.

To avoid misleading environmental claims, companies should evaluate their messaging by measuring it against a set of simple rules. Claims must be clear, easily understandable, and factually accurate. However, the latter alone is not enough; claims should not create a false or exaggerated impression of a product's, process's, or organization's sustainability. They must also be relevant to the specific sustainability attributes they reference, supported by reliable evidence, and transparently disclosed so that audiences can assess their basis in fact. Through disclosure, claims can also go beyond simply informing consumers about the sustainability aspects of products, and prompt them to engage in more sustainable behavior during the consumption and post-consumption phases. If a company wants to avoid greenwashing, it should rely on data, embrace credible third-party certification, and resist stretching the truth about its sustainability performance. It is critical that brands inform and educate consumers about the sustainability attributes of their product claims.

Well-designed sustainability claims can significantly sway consumer purchasing behavior. Such claims can be a powerful tool to guide consumer behavior toward more sustainable choices. Using a carefully crafted claim is also one of the most effective ways for companies to demonstrate to consumers that they are meeting high environmental and social standards.

Implications for policymakers

To effectively address the challenges identified in this study, policymakers should adopt a multi-faceted approach. First, as indicated by findings related to codes #01 to #04, the implementation of regulatory frameworks is essential to ensure the accuracy and transparency of sustainability claims. Clear, enforceable standards can safeguard consumer rights and enhance the credibility of sustainability practices within the fashion industry.

Second, reflecting insights from code #04, policymakers should support initiatives that enrich physical retail spaces. By encouraging investments in informative and engaging in-store environments, policymakers can facilitate consumer access to reliable information about sustainable products. Furthermore, based on results from codes #05 to #09, policy efforts should emphasize consumer protection and the promotion of genuine sustainability to build consumer confidence. This includes prioritizing public education and awareness campaigns that empower consumers to make informed, environmentally conscious choices, and drive demand for sustainable products.

Based on the above, the summary recommendations for policymakers would be to enforce regulations that support transparent sustainability practices, protect consumer rights, and promote educational initiatives to counteract greenwashing. Implementing effective sustainable communication practices can help increase product loyalty and perception, ultimately boosting sales of products seen as authentically eco-friendly (Todeschini et al., 2017). Given the growing relevance of greenwashing in the fashion industry, managers may find it very useful to adopt comprehensive tools and guidelines to develop sustainability claims that drive consumer behavior in a positive direction and protect the brand's reputation from serious negative effects. For this reason, building on the findings of Sheehan et al. (2023), our study introduces an original tool designed to help managers design transparent, evidence-based sustainability claims. This tool aims to align with consumer perceptions and minimize the risk of greenwashing in promoting fashion products.

KEY GUIDELINES AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To avoid greenwashing and ensure that sustainability claims are effective and credible, companies should adhere to the following key guidelines (Table 3):

Clarity and accuracy

- **Clear and understandable**: Claims should be straightforward and easily comprehensible. Avoid technical jargon that might confuse consumers.
- **Accurate information**: Ensure that all information is factually correct. Even if the claim is true, it should not mislead consumers by giving a false impression of the product's or company's sustainability.

Relevance

- **Sustainability focus**: Claims should be directly relevant to the sustainability-related characteristics of the product, process, or organization. Avoid vague or irrelevant claims that do not address core sustainability issues.

Reliability

- **Supported by evidence**: Sustainability claims must be backed by credible evidence. Provide clear and accessible proof that substantiates them.
- **Disclosure of evidence**: Make the evidence behind the claims available to consumers, allowing them to verify the information and understand the basis of the claims.

Consumer engagement

- **Inform and involve**: Beyond simply disclosing information, claims should encourage consumers to engage in sustainable practices during consumption and post-consumption. This can include guidance on recycling or tips on how to use the product more sustainably.

Avoid overstatements

- **Resist overstretching**: Refrain from exaggerating or overstating sustainability achievements. Transparency and honesty are crucial to maintaining consumer trust.

Based on these explanations, two vital implications emerge for both managers and policymakers. The first pertains to the need for robust regulations and standardized frameworks. In 2022, the European Commission introduced a package of proposals aimed at making "sustainable products the norm" (European Commission, 2022b). Central to this initiative are traceability and transparency, which are critical enablers of sustainability and circularity, ensuring that consumers and other stakeholders can make well-informed decisions (UNECE, 2021). As part of the *EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles*, the Commission outlined specific measures to combat greenwashing, including the introduction of a Digital Product Passport. To further strengthen consumer protection, the strategy calls for tighter controls and harmonized standards for sustainability claims to ensure their credibility and prevent misleading information (Rinaldi et al., 2022).

The second implication specifically concerns traceability and transparency mechanisms. Digital Product Passports should be widely implemented to enable end-to-end tracking of products, facilitating more sustainable practices, such as easier repair and recycling. Concurrently, regulatory oversight must be reinforced to ensure that all sustainability claims are not only accurate but are also supported by verifiable evidence.

In line with these implications, the following section outlines key recommendations for both managers and policymakers.

Develop sustainability messages along the marketing funnel using anti-greenwashing tools

- **Sustainability claims toolkit**: Based on the findings of Sheehan et al. (2023), we developed a tool to guide managers in crafting sustainability claims. This tool will help them create transparent, relevant, and evidence-based claims that align with consumer expectations and regulatory standards.

Educate and inform

- **Consumer education**: Invest in educational campaigns to inform consumers about the true sustainability attributes of your products. Clear

TABLE 3. ANTI-GREENWASHING TOOL TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGES

Sustainability principle of respect	Description	What to avoid	Example of a bad or incomplete claim	Example of a good claim	Key benefit
Clarity	Claims need to be clear and understandable.	Making claims that are too technical or vague, hard to understand, with confusing logos or labels.	Introducing the greenest shoe on Earth.	This shoe has been produced by implementing ecodesign principles of durability as demonstrated by test results... and using 50% recycled inputs.	Consumer interest may increase.
Truthfulness & Reliability	Claims need to contain true information. They must not mislead consumers by giving them a false impression of sustainability with respect to characteristics of the product, the process, or the organization. Claims need to be reliable, and supported by evidence that demonstrates the content of the claim.	Making exaggerated claims and presenting self-reported data that are inaccurate or inflated. Making claims without supporting evidence.	100% sustainable preloved t-shirt	LCA (Lifecycle Assessment) data on the environmental impact of this pre-loved t-shirt confirm that it's more sustainable than a recycled polyester t-shirt (i.e. 0.155 kg CO_2-e to recycle a polyester t-shirt, compared to 0.129 kg CO_2-e when reusing this t-shirt)	Consumer loyalty and trust may increase.
Disclosure	Claims need to be disclosed to help the audience understand the evidence behind the claims. Claims can also go beyond simply informing consumers on the sustainability aspects of products by prompting them to act more sustainably during consumption and post-consumption phases.	Making claims that are limited to providing information.	This pair of jeans consumes 2,000 liters of water during its life cycle.	This pair of jeans consumes 2,000 liters of water during its life cycle. NOW IT'S YOUR TURN A pair of jeans can consume up to 3,800 liters of water during its life cycle, and 23% of this depends on how you care for the denim. Here are some things you can do to help save water: 1. Wash your denim items less often. Limiting the use of the washing machine will help you preserve the color and fabric and save a huge amount of water too. 2. When you need to, be sure to wash them in cold water, this will save energy. 3. Between washes, you can hang your jeans in the sun to eliminate bacteria.	Consumer awareness, interest, and engagement may increase.
Relevance	Claims need to be relevant to the sustainability of the product, process, or business.	Making generic claims (without a precise focus on environmental or social risk).	This is an ethical sweater.	This is an ethical sweater because our company has been collaborating with a social cooperative for years, ensuring living wages for the people who produced this garment.	Consumer awareness, interest, and engagement may increase.

Source: Authors' elaboration

communication can mitigate skepticism and foster trust.

Enhance product transparency

- **Showcase evidence**: Regularly update consumers with transparent information about sustainability practices and product quality. Provide easy access to evidence supporting your claims.

By implementing these guidelines, companies can effectively avoid greenwashing, build consumer trust, and enhance their brand's reputation. Managers should utilize comprehensive tools and practices to create genuine sustainability claims that positively influence consumer behavior and support the growth of a truly sustainable fashion industry.

Linking the principles outlined in the anti-greenwashing tool to the marketing funnel, we see that effective sustainability claims directly impact each stage of consumer engagement and decision-making. In the awareness stage, clarity is crucial. Clear, understandable claims capture consumers' attention and spark initial interest. For instance, instead of vague statements like "the greenest shoe on Earth", a precise claim detailing eco-design principles and recycled materials helps potential customers recognize the product's sustainability attributes. Moving to the interest stage, truthfulness and reliability play a pivotal role. Claims must be accurate and supported by credible evidence to build trust. Consumers are more likely to stay engaged when presented with verifiable information, such as Lifecycle Assessment data for a preloved t-shirt, rather than exaggerated or unsupported claims.

In the consideration stage, disclosure becomes essential. Behavioral campaigns that not only explain the sustainability features but also inform consumers on how to maintain these benefits post-purchase enhance their understanding and involvement. For example, a jeans brand that shares both water usage data and practical tips for conserving water when washing jeans reinforces the consumer's sense of agency and involvement in sustainability. Finally, at the action stage, relevance ensures that the sustainability claims align closely with the actual environmental or social impact of the product. A claim highlighting ethical practices through a social cooperative offers tangible benefits and aligns with consumers' values, motivating them to make a purchase. By integrating these principles into their marketing strategies, companies can effectively guide consumers through the marketing funnel, from initial awareness to final purchase, enhancing overall engagement and satisfaction while building lasting trust.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study examines how consumer perceptions of greenwashing affect their willingness to pay for fashion products. Our findings underscore a strong connection between these perceptions and consumer purchasing behavior. To address this critical issue, we have developed a practical tool designed to guide managers in crafting credible and impactful sustainability claims, helping to mitigate greenwashing in the fashion industry. To effectively avoid greenwashing, companies must ground their sustainability claims in robust and verifiable data, seek credible third-party certifications, and refrain from overstating their environmental achievements. Transparent communication is vital. Brands should focus on educating consumers about the genuine sustainability attributes of their products. When executed thoughtfully, well-structured sustainability claims can significantly shape consumer behavior, increasing their willingness to pay for eco-friendly products. Such claims act as powerful drivers of sustainable consumer choices, enhancing trust, loyalty, and the perceived value of a brand. By demonstrating respect for high environmental and social standards, companies not only foster positive consumer relationships but also position themselves as leaders in ethical fashion practices.

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations offer opportunities for future exploration. The data collection for this study occurred between May and July 2023. Extending the study across multiple years could reveal evolving trends in consumer perceptions of greenwashing and their willingness to pay. A longitudinal approach may also help identify shifts prompted by societal, environmental, or economic factors. In addition, this research focused on a specific sample, predominantly Millennials and Gen Z participants residing in Italy. Future studies could expand the scope by expanding sample size and including participants from diverse regions or cultural backgrounds. Comparative analyses between countries or markets could also provide a richer understanding of how local contexts shape consumer attitudes. Similarly, localized studies in specific regions or time frames could uncover unique, actionable insights.

The qualitative methodology employed in this study enabled a deep exploration of the phenomenon. However, incorporating quantitative methods in future research could help validate findings and build predictive models. By introducing additional variables (such as cultural aspects, socio-economic status, or media influence) researchers could better understand the factors that inform perceptions of greenwashing. Additionally, a comparison between fast fashion and luxury brands could offer valuable insights into differing greenwashing strategies and stakeholder responses. Such an analysis would shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities for sustainable branding across market segments, aiding both industry practitioners and policymakers.

From a theoretical perspective, future research could delve deeper into the intersection of consumer behavior and greenwashing. Moreover, by integrating frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) with institutional theory, researchers can develop a nuanced understanding of how systemic forces and individual attitudes interact. This approach could refine strategies for crafting substantiated and effective sustainability claims tailored to the evolving expectations of consumers in the fashion industry.

This research provides a roadmap for companies to navigate the complex dynamics of greenwashing perceptions. By offering tools to create authentic, data-driven sustainability claims, we aim to empower managers to foster trust, enhance loyalty, and drive positive consumer behavior. While acknowledging its limitations, our study lays the groundwork for further investigation, offering meaningful contributions to both academic discourse and practical applications in the fashion industry. Future investigation holds immense potential to expand on these insights, enabling a more profound understanding of how transparent, ethical practices can transform consumer behavior and drive the adoption of sustainable choices in fashion.

MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **Anti-Greenwashing Toolkit**: A practical resource designed to help managers create transparent, relevant and evidence-based sustainability claims that align with consumer expectations and current regulations.
- **Targeted educational campaigns**: Investing in campaigns to educate consumers about the true sustainability credentials of products.
- **Product transparency**: Provide consumers with regular updates on sustainability practices and product quality. The digital passport can facilitate increased transparency.

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