

# How Critical is Sustainability in Enhancing Sustainable Apparel Purchase Intentions? -Psychological Egoism and Congruity Theory Approach to Understanding the Roles of Brand Type and Green Self-identity-

Jiwoon Kim<sup>†</sup> · Yoo-Won Min · ByoungHo Ellie Jin

Dept. of Textile and Apparel, Technology and Management, North Carolina State University  
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## Abstract

With growing concerns about sustainability in the fashion industry, fashion brands are increasingly promoting their sustainability initiatives. However, do sustainable attributes always drive consumers' purchase intentions toward sustainable apparel? Grounded in psychological egoism and congruity theory, this study aims to understand the effect of conventional and sustainable apparel attributes on purchase intentions for sustainable apparel, considering the roles of brand type (fast fashion vs. sustainable fashion) and green self-identity. Data were collected from an online survey of 244 U.S. consumers aged 18 and older. The results revealed that conventional attributes of quality, fit, style, and comfort had a significantly stronger effect on purchase intentions than sustainable attributes. Both conventional and sustainable attributes enhanced purchase intention for fast fashion brands, while only conventional attributes were significant for sustainable fashion brands. Green self-identity did not have a significant moderating effect, indicating that apparel buying is a behavior less influenced by green self-identity. The findings highlight the importance of conventional attributes while suggesting that attributes perceived as lacking in the brand are crucial for driving purchase intentions. This study offers valuable insights into consumer behavior in sustainable fashion consumption and helps develop effective strategies for fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands.

**Key words:** Apparel attributes, Psychological egoism theory, Congruity theory, Self-congruity theory, Sustainable apparel purchase intention

## I. Introduction

In recent years, sustainability has emerged as a crucial issue within the fashion industry. In response, many fashion brands are prioritizing the promotion of their sustainability efforts in marketing, regardless of their varying brand images and customer segments. For instance, the outdoor apparel brand Patagonia has well-established itself as a responsible fashion brand through its environmentally responsible business

practices and marketing campaigns, such as the "Don't Buy This Jacket" advertisement and the Worn Wear program (Kent, 2022). Meanwhile, fast fashion brands such as H&M and Zara have also launched sustainable collections and are actively communicating their pro-environmental initiatives through various channels (Kil & Chun, 2023; Rahman et al., 2021). However, is sustainability a core apparel attribute that drives consumers' purchase intention of clothing? Would every fashion brand benefit from emphasizing its commitment to sustainability?

Although numerous studies have illustrated the

<sup>†</sup>Corresponding author

E-mail: [jkim233@ncsu.edu](mailto:jkim233@ncsu.edu)

positive effect of sustainability on consumer behavior (Jung et al., 2020; Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008; Kim & Oh, 2020), the significance of sustainability on apparel purchase decisions remains dubious. Many previous studies on sustainability have only focused on sustainability-related factors as the independent variable, not elucidating how important they are compared to the conventional attributes (e.g., quality, fit, and style) that influence apparel choices. On the other hand, earlier studies on apparel attributes did not identify sustainability as a clothing evaluative criterion, including only the appearance and performance aspects and extrinsic attributes such as price (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990; Hines & Swinker, 2001). Relatively recently, some studies have introduced sustainability-related attributes as a new category of apparel product attributes and revealed that they are generally ranked as less important than many of the non-sustainable, conventional apparel attributes (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Rausch et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). However, the existing studies have limited theoretical backgrounds and mostly focused on assessing the importance of various individual attributes, rather than comparing the relative significance of conventional versus sustainable attributes. Also, most previous studies were conducted in the general apparel shopping context, overlooking potential differences across different types of apparel items. Consumers may have different expectations and evaluation criteria for apparel depending on the specific item category or the brand. In particular, there has been a notable lack of research investigating whether the significance of apparel attributes differs by brand type, which is likely to influence apparel evaluation. For example, consumers may expect more sustainable aspects in brands emphasizing sustainability, while they may primarily seek trendy designs from fast fashion brands. Therefore, research conducted in the general apparel shopping context may be insufficient to fully understand the impact of apparel attributes on purchase intention. In addition, consumers' demand for sustainability has increased considerably in the past few years (Reichheld

et al., 2023). Given that the pandemic experience has impacted sustainable consumption intentions (Woo et al., 2024), the significance of sustainable attributes may have evolved in recent years. Accordingly, research reflecting the latest consumer trends will be advantageous in offering more relevant implications.

The present study fills such gaps in the literature by categorizing apparel attributes into conventional and sustainability-related and investigating their relative significance in driving the purchase intention for sustainable apparel, focusing on a basic t-shirt item. Based on the theoretical background of psychological egoism theory, congruity theory, and self-congruity theory, this study aims to identify which type of apparel attributes plays a more critical role in enhancing the purchase intentions for sustainable apparel products, considering the roles of brand type and green self-identity. Among various brands, this study will focus on two types of brands with contrasting brand focuses, fast fashion (e.g., Zara) and sustainable (e.g., Patagonia), to critically examine the significance of sustainability in apparel shopping. Additionally, we consider green self-identity, an individual's self-identification as a green consumer, as a consumer variable that may influence sustainable apparel choices. Defining a product's sustainability is a complex issue; however, this study features apparel products marketed as sustainable, the actual degree of sustainability or greenness being beyond its scope.

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of apparel attributes by encompassing both conventional attributes and sustainable attributes including the environmental, social, and supply chain-related aspects of sustainability. By examining the true impact of sustainability on sustainable apparel purchase decisions and investigating the roles of brand type and consumers' green self-identity, this study extends the existing research on apparel product attributes and sustainable fashion consumption. Also, the findings of this study will offer valuable insights for apparel brands, providing them with guidelines on which attributes they should focus on in order to effectively enhance consumer's purchase intentions.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### 1. Apparel Attributes: Conventional vs. Sustainability-related

Consumers evaluate and select apparel products based on multiple cues and benefits (Rahman et al., 2017). Attributes for product evaluation can be classified into extrinsic and intrinsic attributes (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990; Rahman et al., 2017). Extrinsic attributes refer to the attributes that are not directly attached to the product itself and thus can be modified without changing the product's physical properties or appearance (Hines & Swinker, 2001; Rahman et al., 2017). The most widely studied extrinsic attributes include brand name and price (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995). On the other hand, intrinsic attributes refer to the characteristics that are inherent in the physical product such as fit, color, style, and comfort (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Rahman et al., 2017). Since intrinsic attributes constitute the physical part of the product, changes in these attributes will bring modifications to its appearance and performance (Hines & Swinker, 2001). Intrinsic attributes can be further categorized based on physical and psychic dimensions, with physical utility involving functional and performance aspects (e.g., comfort, durability) and psychic utility involving aesthetic aspects (e.g., style, color) (Rahman et al., 2017, 2021).

Earlier research on apparel attributes mainly addressed extrinsic and intrinsic attributes as apparel evaluative cues (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990; Hines & Swinker, 2001; Jin & Bennur, 2015; Rahman et al., 2017). However, over the last several years, research has extended its scope to include sustainability-related factors as additional criteria for apparel evaluation (Bizuneh et al., 2022; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Rausch et al., 2021). In such studies, sustainable attributes are treated as distinct from existing extrinsic and intrinsic apparel attributes. For example, Rahman and Koszewska (2020) examined the importance of 20 ap-

parel cues, classifying them into 10 non-sustainable and 10 sustainable cues. The non-sustainable cues refer to extrinsic and intrinsic attributes that are not related to sustainable aspects, such as style, color, comfort, fit, brand name, and price, while sustainable cues include various environmental and social/ethical aspects. In another study on Canadian and Indian consumers, apparel attributes were classified into apparel product-related cues (i.e., extrinsic and intrinsic attributes) and sustainable production-related cues (Rahman et al., 2021). Similarly, in their study conducted on online shoppers, Rausch et al. (2021) categorized apparel attributes into two types, conventional and sustainable. The conventional attributes included attributes related to the aesthetic and performance benefits of clothing, as well as extrinsic attributes such as brand and price. The sustainable attributes included attributes related to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Following the categorizations of prior studies, this study categorizes apparel attributes into two types, conventional and sustainable. Conventional attributes encompass the functional and aesthetic aspects of clothing that are not related to sustainability, while sustainable attributes refer to the attributes related to environmental and social responsibility.

### 2. Theoretical Background

#### 1) *Psychological Egoism Theory*

In the understanding of human behavior, egoism has often been regarded as more natural and offering superior explanatory power than altruism (Schmid, 2010). The psychological egoism theory posits that human actions are fundamentally driven by ego-centric motives (Schmid, 2010; Slote, 1964). Individuals are inherently selfish, always acting based on their perceived self-interest. According to this perspective, even seemingly altruistic behaviors may be more sophisticated versions of egoism (Schmid, 2010). For example, people may help others to gain personal satisfaction and pleasure from giving help (Sun et al., 2022).

Psychological egoism theory has been applied in previous research to explain green consumer behavior

(Barbarossa & Pelsmacker, 2016; Sun et al., 2022). Even the purchasing of environmentally friendly products may be driven by the pursuit of self-interest; positive ego-centric motives such as the pursuit of green self-identity or moral obligations have been identified as antecedents for green purchasing intentions (Barbarossa & Pelsmacker, 2016; Sun et al., 2022). That is, consumers may purchase green products for personal benefits, such as to perceive themselves as green consumers or to alleviate negative feelings of guilt. As such, the pursuit of personal interest is important even in the purchase of sustainable products.

## 2) *Congruity Theory*

The principle of congruity has been studied extensively in psychology and consumer behavior research (Clemente et al., 2014; Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Speed & Thompson, 2000). According to congruity theory, individuals tend to favor cognitive and affective consistency and respond favorably when there is a perception of congruity (Mandler, 1982; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Stumpf & Baum, 2016). Congruity occurs when an object or information is consistent with an individual's existing knowledge structure (i.e., schema) (Mandler, 1982). In cases of high incongruity, the mismatch demands greater cognitive effort and is difficult to reconcile, leading to negative consumer reactions and product evaluations (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989).

Research across various areas of consumer behavior has consistently demonstrated that congruent pairings are generally more favored and persuasive. Regarding celebrity endorsement, the congruity between the endorser and the product positively influences advertising effectiveness (Kamins, 1990; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). In sponsorship literature, it has been found that a high fit between a sponsored event and the sponsoring brand positively impacts consumer responses toward the brand (Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Also, in the context of customer referral programs, the congruity between the reward and the advocated brand

leads to enhanced reward attractiveness, brand evaluation, and recommendation likelihood (Stumpf & Baum, 2016). Congruity is also important for brands conducting socially responsible activities, as the fit between the consumer's perceptions of the brand and its socially responsible efforts has been identified as a significant factor in increasing consumer's trust and behavioral intentions (Youn & Cho, 2022).

## 3) *Self-congruity Theory*

Self-congruity refers to the match between an individual's own self-image and the image of a product or brand (Sirgy, 1985). Self-congruity theory posits that consumers are inclined to purchase and use products and services that are congruent with their self-images (Sirgy, 1986). The influence of self-congruity on consumer behavior can be explained through self-concept motives such as the need for self-consistency and self-esteem (Sirgy, 1985). By purchasing products that are perceived to be similar to their actual or ideal self-concept, consumers can reinforce their self-identities or gain positive self-regard (Sirgy, 1985, 1986; Sirgy et al., 2008).

Self-congruity theory highlights the importance of self-image congruence on consumer behavior and has been applied in various studies. Self-congruity positively influences brand attitude and loyalty (Liu et al., 2012), purchase intention of new products (Coward et al., 2008), and repurchase intention of intimate apparel items (Vigolo & Ugolini, 2016). An individual's self-image is also relevant in the context of pro-environmental behaviors (Confente et al., 2020; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). It has been found that an individual's self-identification as a green consumer leads to various pro-environmental behaviors such as waste reduction, water and energy conservation, and sustainable buying (Barbarossa et al., 2017; Dermody et al., 2018; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Considering that consumers may buy sustainable products to reinforce their self-image as green consumers, this study examines green self-identity as a moderator that may influence the effect of sustainability-related apparel attributes on purchase intention.

### 3. Research Framework and Hypotheses

Based on psychological egoism theory, this study aims to investigate the true impact of sustainability on fashion consumer behavior by analyzing the relative significance of conventional versus sustainable apparel attributes on apparel purchase intention. Specifically, we aim to examine the purchase intention for apparel products that are marketed to be sustainable. Also, drawing on congruity theory and self-congruity theory, this study examines whether the brand type (fast fashion vs. sustainable fashion) and green self-identity influence this relationship.

According to the psychological egoism theory, egoism lies in the basis of human actions (Schmid, 2010; Slote, 1964). Pro-environmental behaviors are often interpreted as acts of altruism, but the comparison of egoistic and altruistic motivations in sustainable consumption has yielded varying results depending on the product category. In the context of food, egoistic values (i.e., health concerns) had a stronger effect on organic food purchase intention than altruistic values (i.e., environmental concerns) (Yadav, 2016). On the other hand, in the case of packaging in general, altruistic values had a greater impact on the intention to buy eco-friendly packaged products than egoistic values (Prakash et al., 2019). Meanwhile, regarding sustainable packaging for fashion/beauty products, green value significantly influenced packaging evaluation, but the impact was not greater than that of aesthetic, functional, emotional, or self-expression values (Lee et al., 2023). The psychological egoism perspective can help to understand such inconsistent results about sustainable consumption. In product categories closely tied to consumers' health or well-being (e.g., food), egoistic values tend to be more critical in consumer decision-making. Packaging, which is reported to be influenced by altruistic values, is relatively less related to the fundamental benefits expected from a product and thus is a category less related to the consumer's self-interest. But if the packaging is for fashion/beauty products, which can offer considerable hedonic and symbolic values to the consumer, egoistic motives

such as achieving emotional pleasure or self-expression may become more important.

Apparel products are not directly connected to consumers' health or safety as food products are, but they are capable of providing a wide range of personal benefits in functional, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects. Consumers seek to earn physical protection and comfort, enhance appearances or self-esteem, or express their individuality or social status through clothing (Shim & Bickle, 1994). Their self-interest will be maximized when they select products that offer the greatest direct personal benefits. If consumers seek to maximize their own utility, they are unlikely to prioritize indirect benefits like environmental improvements over direct personal benefits obtained from clothing such as style and comfort. Therefore, conventional apparel attributes that offer tangible benefits to the consumer will typically assert greater influence on consumer choices than sustainable attributes, even for apparel products that are claimed to be sustainable. Several previous studies have reported that conventional apparel attributes are of higher relevance to consumers than sustainable attributes (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Rausch et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022) providing support for this reasoning. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H1. Conventional attributes will have a greater effect on sustainable apparel purchase intention than sustainable attributes.

Fashion brands possess different characteristics and perceptions which may influence consumers' evaluation of their products. Fast fashion brands are known for their rapid production cycles, trendy designs, and affordable prices. However, fast fashion has also been associated with adverse environmental and social impacts related to overproduction, the disposable clothing concept, textile waste problems, and working condition issues of clothing factory workers (Hardy, 2024; McKinsey & Company, 2023). Although they are attempting to move toward sustainability, fast fashion brands are inherently more related to delivering in-

dividual customer benefits such as appealing designs and affordable prices. On the other hand, sustainable fashion brands are established with the mission of reducing the negative environmental and social impacts of fashion (Ike, 2024). Sustainability is central to their core value and branding, attracting consumers who resonate with this commitment. Therefore, sustainable fashion brands will be perceived as being highly congruent with sustainable attributes, while fast fashion brands will be a better fit with conventional apparel attributes.

The congruity theory suggests that congruent elements are processed more easily and generally elicit positive consumer responses (Mandler, 1982; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Stumpf & Baum, 2016). Based on the congruity principle, we hypothesize that product attributes that are congruent with the brand will play a pivotal role in consumer decision-making. Specifically, we posit that the influence of apparel attributes on sustainable apparel purchase intention will differ by brand type. Conventional attributes will exert an even stronger impact in the case of fast fashion brands, while sustainable attributes will hold greater significance for sustainable fashion brands.

H2a. In fast fashion brands, conventional attributes will have a greater effect on sustainable apparel purchase intention compared to sustainable attributes.

H2b. In sustainable fashion brands, sustainable attributes will have a greater effect on sustainable apparel purchase intention compared to conventional attributes.

Green self-identity refers to an individual's self-identification with the typical green consumer (Barbarossa & Pelsmacker, 2016; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992). According to self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986), people tend to purchase products that are similar to their self-images, thereby helping to maintain or enhance their self-concepts. Consequently, individuals who perceive themselves as green consumers are more likely to select sustainable products because

these items align with their self-identity and provide them with self-consistency and satisfaction. Additionally, in line with the psychological egoism literature, green self-identity can be viewed as a positive ego-centric motivation to purchase eco-friendly products (Barbarossa & Pelsmacker, 2016). People may pursue green self-identity and engage in sustainable consumption to enhance their self-esteem and foster positive self-regard.

Previous research has provided evidence that green self-identity acts as a significant determinant of pro-environmental behaviors (Dermody et al., 2018; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Also, the positive role of green self-identity in sustainable consumption has been confirmed in various categories including organic food (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992), eco-friendly tissue paper products (Barbarossa & Pelsmacker, 2016), electric cars (Barbarossa et al., 2017), and bioplastic products (Confente et al., 2020). It is anticipated that green self-identity will similarly affect product choices in the apparel category; individuals who perceive themselves to be green consumers will prioritize sustainability in their apparel choices to be consistent with their self-identity. Thus, we propose that the consumer's green self-identity will moderate the effect of apparel attributes on purchase intention, such that it heightens the relative significance of sustainable apparel attributes.

H3. Green self-identity will increase the relative significance of sustainable attributes compared to conventional attributes in influencing sustainable apparel purchase intention.

### III. Methodology

#### 1. Sample and Data Collection

The participants of this study consisted of U.S. consumers aged 18 and above. Participants of various genders and age groups were included to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Data were collected through a professional survey company following Institutional

Review Board (IRB) approval. Online survey links were sent to the company's consumer panels via email, and responses were collected from those who provided consent.

The final sample consisted of 244 responses. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the two brand types, 120 to a fast fashion brand and 124 to a sustainable fashion brand. Among the 244 participants, 91 (37.3%) were male, 149 (61.1%) were female, and 4 (1.6%) indicated others. The sample comprised various age groups, with an average age of 34.5 years. Of the participants, 92 (37.7%) were in the age group of 18-28 (Generation Z), 100 (41.0%) were aged 29-43 (Millennials), 30 (12.3%) were aged 44-58 (Generation X), and 22 (9.0%) over the age of 59 (Baby Boomer). In terms of ethnicity, more than half of the participants were European and Caucasian American (N = 171, 70.1%), followed by African American (N = 31, 12.7%) and Asian (N = 26, 10.7%). The majority of the participants had some level of college education, with the largest proportion holding a 4-year college degree (N = 87, 35.7%). The most commonly reported annual income level was \$40,000-\$59,999 (N = 54, 22.1%).

## 2. Measurements and Procedure

To select the fast fashion brand and sustainable fashion brand that will be used in the survey, a pre-test of 30 college students was conducted. A list of six brands, three fast fashion and three sustainable fashion, was developed based on the Fashion Transparency Index 2023 (Fashion Revolution, 2023). The participants were asked to evaluate the brands in terms of their sustainability initiatives. Zara (M = 1.43) and Patagonia (M = 6.43) were chosen to represent fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands respectively, as they scored the lowest and highest on the test. Next, we utilized a specific apparel item, a basic white t-shirt, to measure consumer responses more precisely.

The measurement items used in this study were derived from prior studies. Twelve apparel attributes, eight conventional and four sustainable, were chosen

for the survey.

The apparel attributes were selected based on previous research on apparel evaluative cues (Jin & Ben-nur, 2015; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021) considering the significance, relevance, and frequency of adoption in related studies. Among the conventional attributes, six were intrinsic and two were extrinsic attributes. Regarding the sustainable attributes, in addition to environmental friendliness and social responsibility, supply chain transparency and traceability were added by the researcher to provide a more comprehensive perspective. The evaluation of the apparel attributes was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "extremely poor", 7 = "excellent"). Purchase intention was measured using four items from Hausman and Siekpe (2009), and green self-identity was measured using three items adapted from Barbarossa and Pelsmacker (2016). Brand familiarity was included as a control variable and was measured using three items adapted from Gwinner and Eaton (1999). All the items except for the apparel attributes were measured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored from 1 as "strongly disagree" and 7 as "strongly agree". Lastly, demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and income level were collected.

The first section of the survey presented a basic t-shirt from either Zara or Patagonia, which was described as a "sustainable t-shirt". The participants were assigned to one of the two brands and were asked, "Imagine you are buying the above product at its normal price point. How would you evaluate the above product in terms of each attribute?". Then they were provided 12 items of apparel attributes – eight conventional and four sustainable. Subsequently, they were asked to answer questions about the other constructs in the current study, such as purchase intention, green self-identity, brand familiarity, and demographics.

## IV. Results

### 1. Preliminary Analyses

Prior to hypotheses testing, confirmatory factor ana-

**Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results of the measurement model**

Construct/items	Standardized factor loadings	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CR	AVE
<b>Conventional attributes</b>		.86	.63	.61
Quality	.78			
Fit	.83			
Style	.81			
Comfort	.70			
<b>Sustainable attributes</b>		.95	.87	.84
Environmental friendliness	.87			
Brand's social responsibility	.90			
Brand's supply chain transparency	.95			
Brand's supply chain traceability	.94			
<b>Purchase intention</b>		.96	.78	.86
I will definitely buy this product in the near future.	.90			
I intend to purchase this product in the near future.	.93			
It is likely that I will purchase this product in the near future.	.94			
I expect to purchase this product in the near future.	.94			

lysis using Amos 22.0 was conducted to evaluate the measurement model. The initial model included twelve apparel attribute items in total. However, four conventional attribute items, two extrinsic and two intrinsic, were eliminated due to high error variances, leaving four conventional (quality, fit, style, comfort) and four sustainable attributes (environmental friendliness, brand's social responsibility, brand's supply chain transparency, brand's supply chain traceability) in the final model (Table 1). The measurement model demonstrated a satisfactory fit ( $\chi^2 = 115.61$ ,  $df = 51$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.27$ , NFI = .96, TLI = .97, CFI = .98, GFI = .93, RMSEA = .07). All standardized factor loadings were significant ( $p < .001$ ) and ranged from .70 to .95. Cronbach's alpha values of constructs

ranged from .86 to .96, indicating adequate reliability. The composite reliability (CR) values were close to .70 and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded .50 for all constructs, indicating acceptable convergent validity. Discriminant validity was also confirmed, as the AVEs of constructs were greater than the square of the correlation between constructs (Table 2).

## 2. Hypotheses Testing

### 1) The Effect of Conventional vs. Sustainable Attributes

Structural equation modeling was conducted to test the hypothesis on the significance of conventional and sustainable apparel attributes, with age, gender, brand, and brand familiarity included as control variables. The fit of the structural model was satisfactory ( $\chi^2 = 157.81$ ,  $df = 87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.83$ , NFI = .95, TLI = .97, CFI = .98, GFI = .92, RMSEA = .06). The results revealed that conventional attributes ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $t = 4.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sustainable attributes ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ) both positively influenced sustainable apparel purchase intention, with conventional attributes having a greater impact. To further examine if this differ-

**Table 2. Correlation analysis and discriminant validity results**

	1	2	3
1. Conventional attributes	<b>.61</b>		
2. Sustainable attributes	.41	<b>.83</b>	
3. Purchase intention	.33	.24	<b>.86</b>

Each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) is shown on the diagonal. The square of the correlation between constructs is shown at the bottom of the diagonal.



ence is significant, pairwise parameter comparisons were utilized. The critical ratios for differences between parameters showed that there is a significant difference between the effect of conventional and sustainable attributes ( $-2.02 < t_{crit} = -1.96$ ), supporting H1. That is, conventional attributes exert a significantly stronger influence on sustainable apparel purchase intention than sustainable attributes. In line with psychological egoism theory, the results support that consumers' intentions to buy a sustainable apparel item are driven more by conventional attributes directly related to personal benefits than by sustainable attributes.

**2) The Comparison of Fast Fashion vs. Sustainable Fashion Brands**

Next, we investigated the role of brand types proposed in H2 by examining the relative significance of conventional and sustainable attributes in each brand type. Age, gender, and brand familiarity were included as control variables. The sample sizes of fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands were 120 and 124, respectively.

First, we examined the effect of conventional and sustainable attributes on purchase intention in fast fashion brand apparel. The results showed that both conventional attributes ( $\beta = .27, t = 2.37, p < .05$ ) and sustainable attributes ( $\beta = .35, t = 3.37, p < .001$ ) led to purchase intention. Unlike our expectations, the effect of sustainable attributes was no less than that of con-

ventional attributes in the fast fashion context. The critical ratios for differences between parameters revealed that the impact of conventional attributes and sustainable attributes on apparel purchase intention are not statistically different ( $.09 < t_{crit} = 1.96$ ). That is, they are both crucial in shaping consumers' purchase intention of sustainable apparel products from a fast fashion brand. Thus, H2a was not supported.

Second, we analyzed the effect of conventional and sustainable attributes on purchase intention in sustainable fashion brand apparel. In sustainable fashion brands, conventional attributes ( $\beta = .49, t = 4.17, p < .001$ ) enhanced purchase intention while sustainable attributes ( $\beta = -.01, t = -.10, p = .917$ ) did not have a significant effect. This result contradicts our expectations, as we had proposed that sustainable attributes aligning with the brand image would resonate more with consumers in sustainable fashion brand apparel. Thus, H2b was rejected. Conventional attributes, rather than sustainable attributes, were found to be the key drivers for the purchase intention of sustainable apparel products from a sustainable fashion brand. The different results for fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands indicate that brand type is a significant factor, but the outcomes did not conform to our expectations based on congruity theory (Fig. 1).

**3) The Moderating Role of Green Self-identity**

The moderating role of green self-identity was examined through hierarchical regression analysis. The

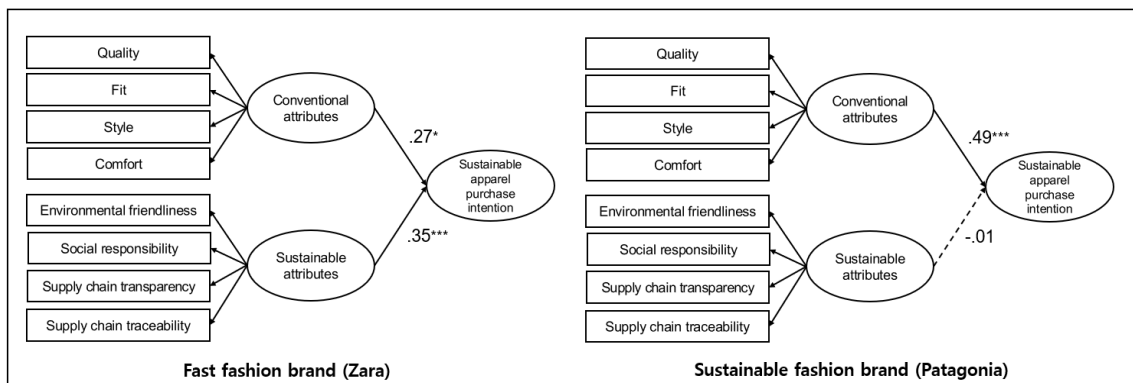


Fig. 1. Path analysis results in fast fashion brand and sustainable fashion brand.

**Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis results**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Gender	.20**	.13*	.14*	.13*
Age	.03	-.02	.01	.01
Brand	-.03	.05	.06	.05
Brand familiarity	.40***	.19**	.16**	.17**
Conventional attributes		.34***	.33***	.31***
Sustainable attributes		.18**	.10	.11
Green self-identity (SI)			.25***	.25***
Conventional $\times$ Green SI				-.05
Sustainable $\times$ Green SI				.07
R <sup>2</sup>	.19	.36	.41	.41
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.18	.35	.39	.39
R <sup>2</sup> change	.19***	.17***	.05***	.00
F	13.93***	22.09***	23.15***	18.04***

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The dependent variable is sustainable apparel purchase intention.

variables used in the interaction terms were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity. Model 1 includes control variables of gender, age, brand type, and brand familiarity. Gender was coded with female as 0, serving as the baseline, and male as 1. Regarding brand type, sustainable fashion brand was coded as the baseline. In Model 2, the two independent variables (i.e., conventional and sustainable attributes) were added. Model 3 includes green self-identity, and Model 4 includes all variables including the interaction terms of apparel attributes and green self-identity. The results indicated that green self-identity does not have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between conventional ( $\beta = -.05, p = .472$ ) and sustainable ( $\beta = .07, p = .313$ ) attributes and sustainable apparel purchase intention (Table 3). Therefore, H3 was not supported.

## V. Conclusion

### 1. Discussion

This study empirically examined the relative sig-

nificance of conventional versus sustainable apparel attributes on sustainable apparel purchase intention, utilizing the theoretical frameworks of psychological egoism theory, congruity theory, and self-congruity theory. Through an analysis of data collected from 244 U.S. consumers, we found support for H1 that conventional attributes are significantly more influential than sustainable attributes in shaping sustainable apparel purchase intentions. This result is consistent with previous literature suggesting that conventional, non-sustainable attributes are generally more important than sustainable attributes in apparel evaluation (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Rausch et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). This finding aligns with the psychological egoism perspective, which posits that self-interest is the primary driver of human actions (Schmid, 2010; Slote, 1964). Consumers are primarily motivated to buy clothing that offers them direct personal benefits through superior quality, fit, style, and comfort. Fashion consumers' pursuit of self-interest has also been evidenced in previous research; even among different types of sustainable fashion, bio-based clothing which is perceived as good quality is appre-

ciated by consumers, while secondhand clothing sees lower purchase intentions and willingness to pay due to its association with low quality (Colasante & D'Adamo, 2021). Similarly, studies have found that consumers often pursue sustainability not solely for altruistic reasons but for egoistic reasons such as perceived quality or enhancing their social status (Gomes et al., 2023; Huh & Kim, 2024). This study provides support for the psychological egoism theory and reinforces the importance of conventional attributes in driving consumers' apparel purchase intentions. Although the consumer interest in sustainability has grown in recent years, the core values consumers seek in apparel continue to center on its appearance and performance which could provide them with direct personal benefits, even for items marketed as "sustainable".

This study also revealed that the significance of conventional and sustainable attributes differs by brand type. However, the results were in opposition to our initial assumptions based on congruity theory, rejecting H2a and H2b. We had expected that attributes congruent with the existing brand image would be more persuasive – conventional attributes will have a dominant effect on the purchase intention for fast fashion brands, while sustainable attributes would be relatively more important in the context of sustainable fashion brands. On the contrary, the results showed that both conventional and sustainable attributes significantly enhanced the purchase intention for fast fashion brand apparel, whereas only conventional attributes boosted the purchase intention for sustainable fashion brand apparel. It is noteworthy that sustainable attributes encourage the purchase of fast fashion brand items but not sustainable brand apparel. This interesting result may be interpreted through Heider's (1958) balance theory. People prefer balanced states and automatically process information to maintain such balance. When they face imbalances, they strive to restore the balance by changing their attitudes or relationships. Concerns about sustainability may cause a psychological imbalance in the context of fast fashion brands typically known for detrimental environmental impacts. Thus, sustainable cues may play a critical role in con-

sumer choices for such items by alleviating their feelings of guilt associated with fast fashion consumption. On the other hand, sustainable fashion brands like Patagonia do not pose the same kind of discomfort in consumers' minds. Because they are already perceived to be sustainable, positive evaluations in terms of the item's aesthetic or functional aspects may be more crucial in encouraging purchase. Our findings suggest that complementary attributes that can address the areas that may be lacking in the brand are effective in driving the purchase intention of clothing. That is, sustainable attributes are important for fast fashion brands like Zara, while conventional attributes such as style and fit are critical for sustainable fashion brands like Patagonia. This result is in line with the findings of Grazzini et al. (2021), which revealed that while fast fashion is perceived as distant from sustainability, sustainable attributes increase consumers' purchase intention, particularly in the case of fast fashion. Also, our results can be interpreted in relation to eco-shame, which refers to the feelings of shame or discomfort individuals feel when they become concerned about their environmentally harmful behaviors (Nicolau et al., 2024). Nicolau et al. (2024) found that eco-shame significantly enhances purchase intentions toward sustainable apparel items, which supports why sustainable attributes were critical in increasing purchase intentions toward fast fashion commonly associated with negative environmental impacts.

Finally, we examined the role of green self-identity in the relationship between conventional and sustainable apparel attributes and sustainable apparel purchase intentions. Based on self-congruity theory, we anticipated that consumers with high green self-identity would prioritize sustainable attributes more when purchasing apparel. However, the results revealed that green self-identity did not have a significant moderating effect, rejecting H3. Regardless of their green self-identity levels, consumers prioritized conventional attributes when purchasing clothing. This finding does not align with previous studies that indicate green self-identity as a determinant of pro-environmental behaviors (Barbarossa et al., 2017; Dermody et al., 2018;

Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). This apparent inconsistency suggests that pro-environmental behaviors driven by green self-identity may be highly category-specific. That is, individuals who perceive themselves as green consumers may engage in various eco-friendly behaviors in their daily lives, but buying apparel may not be one of them. Pro-environmental behavior in previous literature includes general actions such as energy conservation and waste reduction (Dermody et al., 2018; Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). While sustainable buying was also identified as a type of pro-environmental behavior, it was not focused on the apparel category, encompassing factors such as purchasing organic food or products with less packaging. Our findings imply that apparel consumption is an area less influenced by environmental concerns and green self-identity. This may be attributed to the fact that clothing is a product category strongly associated with self-interest, providing various functional, aesthetic, and symbolic benefits. Although the pursuit of green self-identity may offer some degree of personal benefits through enhanced self-regard (Barbarossa & Pelsmacker, 2016), these benefits do not outweigh the immediate advantages of fashion items with good design and quality. As a result, consumers are likely to select items based on conventional attributes rather than sustainable attributes, even if they have a high level of green self-identity.

## 2. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This study offers several significant theoretical implications. First, this study aimed to investigate the true impact of sustainability on apparel purchase intentions by comparing its relative significance to conventional attributes. The significance of sustainability in consumer behavior has been widely studied in previous research (Jung et al., 2020; Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008; Kim & Oh, 2020). However, many studies focused only on examining the impact of sustainability-related factors, not comparing their significance to other factors inseparable in the fashion shopping context such as quality and style. Even if sustain-

ability itself has a positive impact on consumer responses, its influence on actual consumer behavior may not be as significant if the impact of other factors is much greater. There is limited research that examined how important sustainability is compared to conventional attributes consumers consider when shopping for apparel. This study fills gaps in the literature and provides more relevant implications.

Second, this study makes theoretical contributions by offering theoretical backgrounds and explanations regarding the significance of conventional and sustainable apparel attributes. Based on the theoretical background of psychological egoism, this study proposed that conventional attributes will be more central to driving apparel purchase intentions than sustainability-related attributes and validated it empirically. Several previous studies have obtained similar results (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Rausch et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022), but they had limited theoretical backgrounds and mostly focused on exploring and comparing the importance of various individual attributes. This study is differentiated from previous apparel attribute studies in that it focuses on the comprehensive comparison between conventional versus sustainable attributes, grounded in the theoretical framework of psychological egoism theory, congruity theory, and self-congruity theory.

Third, this study is among the earliest attempts to incorporate brand type (e.g., fast fashion vs. sustainable fashion) into apparel attribute research. While apparel attributes have been extensively studied in previous literature (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Eckman et al., 1990; Hines & Swinker, 2001; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Rahman et al., 2017), there has been a paucity of research investigating if the significance of apparel attributes varies by brand type. In this study, we examined the relative importance of conventional and sustainable apparel attributes across two types of brands, fast fashion and sustainable fashion, and obtained significant results. This contributes to the literature on apparel evaluation, emphasizing the need to consider brand characteristics in the assessment of apparel attributes.

Fourth, our unique finding regarding H2a and H2b offers a fresh perspective grounded in Heider's (1958) balance theory on which attributes are more critical in driving the purchase intention of fast fashion and sustainable brand clothing. In contradiction to our initial assumptions, sustainable attributes were found to be crucial in the purchase of fast fashion, whereas conventional attributes were relevant in the purchase of sustainable brand apparel. Notably, sustainable attributes significantly encourage the purchase intention for fast fashion apparel but do not have the same effect on sustainable fashion brand apparel. Instead, only conventional attributes such as quality, fit, style, and comfort were found to significantly increase the purchase intention for sustainable fashion brand apparel. Interpreted through the lens of balance theory, the findings indicate that sustainability enhances purchase intentions for brands perceived as deficient in this aspect by resolving consumers' psychological imbalance. This explanation provides a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and suggests avenues for future research.

Next, we discovered that green self-identity does not significantly boost the impact of sustainability in the apparel shopping context. While previous research shows that green self-identity leads to various pro-environmental behaviors (Barbarossa et al., 2017; Dermody et al., 2018; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010), our findings provide evidence that its influence is limited to specific behaviors and does not extend to sustainable apparel consumption. Our results suggest that purchasing apparel may require a distinct approach, separate from other sustainable buying behaviors. These findings enrich the green self-identity literature and underscore the need for further research on sustainable consumer behavior within the apparel sector.

Lastly, this study contributes to the apparel evaluation literature by identifying the key conventional and sustainable apparel attributes that influence purchase intentions. In this study, quality, fit, style, and comfort were identified as relevant conventional attributes, while environmental friendliness, the brand's social responsibility, supply chain transparency, and supply

chain traceability were recognized as significant sustainable attributes. The research on sustainable apparel attributes is still in its early stages, and the attributes examined in this study can provide a foundation for subsequent research on conventional and sustainable attributes.

The findings of this study also provide important managerial implications. First, as conventional attributes of quality, fit, style, and comfort were found to be the most critical in increasing apparel purchase intentions, fashion brands should primarily focus on creating positive perceptions related to those attributes. Although the promotion of sustainability has proven to be effective (Jung et al., 2020; Kim & Oh, 2020), our findings suggest that its relative significance is not greater than that of conventional attributes. Therefore, apparel brands should maintain their focus on strengthening the core benefits of their products related to the aesthetic and performance aspects. Even as they pursue sustainability, brands should ensure they do not neglect the fundamental attributes that make their products appeal to consumers.

Second, our findings based on the psychological egoism theory provide implications for fashion brands on how to conduct more effective green marketing. Sustainability is now a fundamental issue for both fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands. However, considering that the pursuit of self-interest is fundamental in human behavior, environmental friendliness or social responsibility alone may not be the most attractive attribute to consumers if they are not associated with substantial self-benefits. Brands will be able to benefit more from the promotion of sustainability if they associate the concept of sustainability with personal benefits such as higher quality, trendiness, or privileged image. This suggestion is in line with the findings of Huh and Kim (2024), which revealed that purchase intentions toward some types of sustainable apparel (e.g., organic apparel) are driven by status-seeking motivations. Signifying the extensive time and effort invested in sustainable production, sustainable apparel can be perceived as a status symbol and preferred by consumers out of such

self-interests (Huh & Kim, 2024). As such, fashion brands should strive to relate sustainability with greater functional, aesthetic, or symbolic values to the consumer to make real changes.

Third, as we discovered that the significance of apparel attributes differs by brand type, fashion brands should develop distinct marketing strategies based on their brand images and characteristics. Specifically, in the case of fashion brands that are already well-recognized for their sustainability initiatives, further emphasis on sustainability may not substantially increase consumers' purchase intention of their products. Rather, it may be wiser to focus on making the product itself more attractive. On the other hand, fast fashion brands may benefit more from the reinforcement of sustainability in their products. Consumers may be motivated to buy fast fashion brand items if they are perceived to be also sustainable, as it resolves their psychological discomfort or eco-shame related to consuming fast fashion. In sum, apparel brands should strive to demonstrate complementary values to their consumers in order to effectively enhance purchase intentions.

In addition, the findings of this study offer insights into targeting green consumers. Claims of increasing consumer demand for sustainability have been prompting companies across various industries to adopt sustainability-related practices. However, our findings regarding green self-identity imply that a consumer's self-identity as a green consumer may only influence certain types of pro-environmental behaviors, not necessarily translating into the purchase of sustainable products. In particular, in the apparel category, consumers do not prioritize sustainability when they buy clothing, even if they consider themselves to be green consumers. Companies should take this into account when they approach sustainability as a strategy to appeal to green consumers.

### 3. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offers meaningful implications, some limitations exist. First, this study utilized a basic t-shirt stimulus to assess apparel attributes and pur-

chase intentions. We selected a specific apparel item (i.e., a t-shirt) to prevent potential confusion and inconsistencies that could arise from conducting the study in a general apparel shopping context. However, the results may vary in other types of apparel with different levels of conspicuousness or consumer involvement. Future research could replicate this study in other apparel categories to provide further insights. Second, this study was conducted on U.S. consumers only, so the findings may not be generalizable to other countries. Future studies can consider examining if the results are consistent in other countries with different cultures or socioeconomic development levels. Third, we focused on fast fashion and sustainable fashion brands in our examination of brand types. Future research on apparel attributes could explore a broader range of brand types beyond the two examined in this study, such as luxury or designer brands. Finally, this study focused on a comprehensive analysis of general consumers, providing a foundational understanding of consumer behavior in sustainable fashion consumption. Building on the findings of this study, future studies could investigate the effect of demographic variables such as gender or age.

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Not applicable.

#### 2. Ethics and consent

This research was conducted under the approval and supervision of the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University (IRB Approval No. 26667).

#### 3. Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study can be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

#### 4. Conflicting interests

Not applicable.

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## 6. Authors' contributions

JK developed research ideas/hypotheses, conducted data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. YM developed research ideas and managed questionnaire development, pre-test, and data collection. BEJ developed research ideas, reviewed the draft, and coordinated efforts throughout the research project. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## 7. Authors' information

### Jiwoon Kim

Dept. of Textile and Apparel, Technology and Management, North Carolina State University, NC, USA, Doctoral student

### Yoo-Won Min

Dept. of Textile and Apparel, Technology and Management, North Carolina State University, NC, USA, Doctoral student

### ByoungHo Ellie Jin

Dept. of Textile and Apparel, Technology and Management, North Carolina State University, NC, USA, Albert Myers Distinguished Professor

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