

The impact of social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability initiatives on pro-environmental consumers' purchase intentions.

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ABSTRACT

The impact of social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability initiatives on pro-environmental consumers' purchase intentions.

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The global shift toward sustainability has prompted brands to promote their sustainability initiatives on social media, aiming to connect with pro-environmental consumers. However, this strategy comes with risks, as social media allows for swift and widespread backlash if consumers perceive greenwashing. The present work examines the impact of social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability initiatives on consumers' purchase intentions. In an experimental study (N = 553), participants were presented social media responses to a fictitious brand's sustainability initiative that were either negative, positive, or a mix of both. The findings indicate that the negative comments decreased purchase intentions for consumers with a pro-environmentalist identity but not otherwise. Moreover, this effect was mediated by decreased perceptions of value-congruence with the brand. This study contributes to larger academic discourses on sustainable marketing, greenwashing, and consumer-brand relationships while providing tangible recommendations to marketing practitioners attempting to mitigate the challenges posed by social media backlash.

Keywords: sustainability promotion, social media backlash, greenwashing, Negative Word-of-Mouth (NWOM), social identity, social influence, and value congruence.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction:

In recent years, global awareness of environmental issues and the rise of environmental protection activities have become more prevalent throughout the world. Specifically, there has been a noticeable increase in consumers' interest in sustainability and conscientious consumerism (Kim & Oh, 2020). According to a global survey by Unilever, one in three individuals (33%) actively chose to buy from brands they believe are making positive environmental contributions (Kong et al., 2021). Consequently, consumers are demanding companies focus on sustainability in their practices (Smith & Brower, 2012). This noticeable increase in consumer attention and awareness regarding sustainability and sustainable products has led to increased pressure on brands (Wallach & Popovich, 2023). Consequently, brands are increasingly developing and promoting green or environmentally friendly products (Smith & Brower, 2012) and trying to align with the evolving perspectives of consumers (Chen, 2010).

In this shift toward sustainability, brands are utilizing social media platforms to communicate their sustainability efforts, as these platforms offer numerous channels through which brands can connect and share their messages on a larger scale (Oppong-Tawiah & Webster, 2023). When brands promote their sustainability initiatives, they can signal to pro-environmental consumers – consumers who consider environmental issues while making consumption decisions (Meffert, 2013; Peattie, 2010) that they share similar values (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). This can foster a sense of value congruence which is the degree to which consumers perceive their personal values match the values

of a brand (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). This alignment between brands and pro-environmental consumers has the potential to generate various positive implications for the brand, such as increased brand loyalty, positive Word-of-Mouth (PWOM), and enhanced brand reputation (Lipsman et al., 2012).

However, social media platforms can also increase risks for brands as consumers now can share their negative experiences with a global audience and connect directly with brands through messages, comments, mentions, and reviews (Zhao et al., 2022). Similarly, as brands promote their sustainability efforts, instances arise where consumers question the authenticity of these claims on social media, suspecting potential greenwashing – the act of brands misleadingly presenting themselves as environmentally responsible (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013).

Given the viral nature of social media, these concerns about greenwashing can quickly gain traction, turn into mass backlash, and potentially damage the reputation of brands (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). For example, when Amazon released a video on Twitter highlighting a decrease in packaging weight as part of their sustainability initiative, it triggered accusations of corporate hypocrisy on social media, with users criticizing them for their excessive packaging practices (Booker, 2020).

This situation underscores how easily and rapidly a brand's actions can be questioned and criticized if the consumers perceive any inconsistency between the what the brand promotes and what it actually does. Thus, while the promotion of a brand's sustainability initiatives on social media can lead to positive reactions from those who share concerns

about the environment, social media backlash toward such initiatives can also impact pro-environmental consumers to dislike the brand.

This research examines the impact of social media backlash towards a brand's sustainability initiative to test the impact of such backlash on purchase intentions. Furthermore, based on prior theorizing suggesting that consumers can identify with brands that share similar values (Kermani et al., 2023), the current research proposes that social media backlash can instead lead pro-environmental consumers to disidentify with the target brand and lead to feelings of value incongruence.

1.2 Rationale of the study:

While existing research has explored the positive impacts of a brand's sustainability initiatives (Wong, 2023) and the detrimental consequences of greenwashing (Brouwer, 2016), there remains a gap in the understanding of how negative public reactions on social media can potentially diminish the credibility of a brand's sustainability efforts. This study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring how negative social media comments accusing a brand of engaging in greenwashing can potentially cause consumers to view the brand in a negative light and subsequently affect their intentions to purchase the brand. The focus of this research is especially on consumers who are genuinely concerned about the environment, precisely the audience the brand aims to attract through its sustainability initiatives.

Prior research suggests that consumers have a desire to punish brand's engaging in greenwashing through negative Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) (Giannaki, 2021),

including posting negative comments on social media platforms and thereby attempting to persuade others to view the brand negatively (Giannaki, 2021; Chang, 2011; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). However, to my knowledge, there has been no research to date that has examined the impact of such negative eWOM in persuading other observing consumers. Furthermore, the current study examines whether observing consumer responses to negative eWOM can vary depending on whether they are environmentalists or not. Namely, based on the notion that individuals seek information from others to make accurate judgements that are consistent with their self-identity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, Pavlović-Höck, 2022), the current research proposes that the impact of social media backlash (i.e., negative eWOM) should be more pronounced for those who hold pro-environmentalist identities, whereas the impact of backlash should be less pronounced amongst those who are less concerned about the environment.

Additionally, the significance of this research extends beyond academic inquiry by highlighting how social media backlash against a brand's sustainability claims can negatively influence consumer purchase intentions and subsequently affect brand reputation. These findings will help marketers realize the potential repercussions of misleading sustainability claims and the importance of transparent communication in real-world business scenarios.

This research also highlights the power of consumers in holding brands accountable, especially regarding their sustainability claims and practices. Henceforth, this study will help marketers to understand that when they say their brands are sustainable, they need to make sure that they truly are. Pretending to be "sustainable" without actually being so

can lead to backlash from consumers, which can be detrimental to their sustainability claims. Thus, it is much better for marketers to focus on being genuinely sustainable rather than risking the consequences of being caught in greenwashing.

1.3 Chapter Outline:

This thesis contributes to the literature by examining the conditions in which social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability initiatives leads to reduced purchase intentions among pro-environmental consumers. The present work consists of six chapters that aim to enhance our understanding of the impact of social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability initiatives on consumers' purchase intention. The basis of this research is laid on the theoretical framework, which is chapter 2 and is presented after the introduction. In Chapter 2, I delve into the theoretical background of social media, social media backlash, greenwashing, Word-of-Mouth (WOM), and value congruence. I also use the Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explain the connection between consumer identities and brands and the concept of social influence to understand how consumers are more likely to be influenced by the reaction of others. Drawing from existing literature, two hypotheses are developed. In Chapter 3, I explain the procedure used and in Chapter 4, I provide empirical evidence that social media backlash against a brand's sustainability initiatives can lead to decreased purchase intention among pro-environmental consumers by decreasing those consumers' feeling of value congruence. In Chapter 5, I discuss the theoretical implications and managerial implications. Finally, in Chapter 6, I provide directions for future research and conclude by providing a cohesive overview of the study itself.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides insights into the growing demand for sustainable products among consumers and how the emergence of social media has changed the dynamics for brands while promoting its sustainability initiatives. Specifically, it focuses on the pervasive issues of social media backlash, outlining how such negative social media comments can undermine a brand's sustainability claims, damage its reputation, and alter consumer perception and attitude. The discussion extends to encompass various concepts, including sustainability promotion on social media, greenwashing, Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), encompassing both positive and negative ones. This chapter also provides a theoretical understanding of social identity, social influence, and value congruence, collectively aiding the readers in navigating the research.

2.1 Conceptual framework:

The current research examined consumer backlash expressed on social media in response to a brand's sustainability claims and evaluated the potential challenges that brands may encounter as a result of such backlash. I make my predictions by developing a conceptual model (see Figure 1), which illustrates the relationship between social media backlash and consumers' purchase intentions. The model illustrates that consumers who possess a pro-environmental identity are more likely to be susceptible to social media backlash because it can adversely affect their perceptions of value congruence with the brand, consequently reducing their intent to purchase it.

More specifically, the model examines how the relationship between social media backlash and consumers' purchase intentions is mediated by value congruence. The central assertion of the model supports the idea that social media backlash has the potential to diminish feelings of value congruency with a brand, subsequently leading to a decrease in purchase intention among consumers with a pro-environmental identity but not when consumers do not hold such an identity.

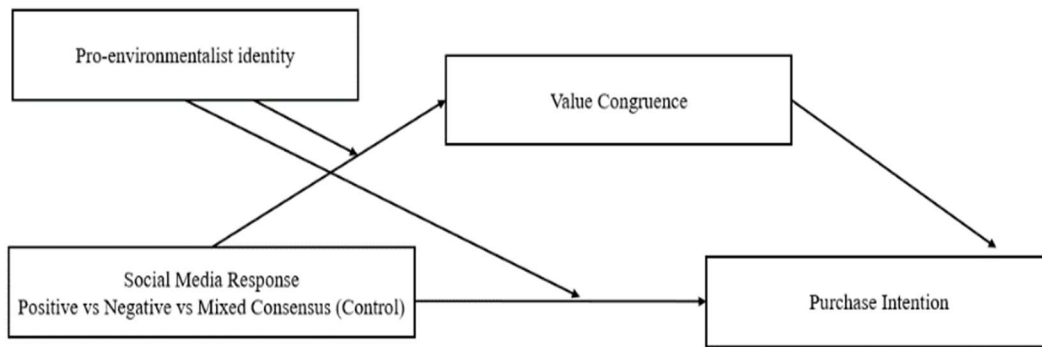


Figure 1: Conceptual model

2.2 Sustainability Promotion and Social Media:

Consumers have now become more conscious of the importance of a sustainable environment and are actively seeking out products that align with their values. They are trying to purchase and consume sustainable products so long as they perceive them to be adequately trustworthy regarding their sustainable performance and usefulness (Lin et al., 2021). Subsequently, brands are adapting to the increased environmental consciousness among consumers and the growing significance consumers attribute to sustainable

practices and products by promoting shared values and environmentalism (Wallach & Popovich, 2023).

An increasing number of brands are placing sustainability at the center of their brand strategy (e.g., Patagonia) and some of the major brands such as Gucci, have even been appreciated by the media for their initiatives in environmental sustainability (Kim & Hall, 2015). They are incorporating eco-friendly practices into their production processes and emphasizing the environmental benefits of their products (Kim & Hall, 2015). This indicates that brands are now not only considering the commitment to sustainability as a responsibility they need to fulfill, but also as a potential source of financial gains (Wallach & Popovich, 2023; Reeves et al., 2012).

Brands now recognize that by aligning with the growing consumer demand for sustainable choices, they have the potential to expand their customer base. This alignment may elicit positive feedback from consumers, which, in turn, can foster customer loyalty and positively impact sales and revenue (Wallach & Popovich, 2023; Reeves et al., 2012). That being said, it has become increasingly clear that sustainability is not merely a trend but a fundamental aspect influencing the choices of consumers and if brands want to succeed, they need to emphasize the enduring significance of sustainable practices as well.

The transformation to sustainable environmental impacts for brands is paralleled by the dynamic nature of social media platforms like Twitter (now known as X), Instagram, and Facebook, which have become convenient spaces for consumers to engage in conversations, exchange information, and foster social interactions (Lee, 2017).

Consumers now use social media platforms to connect with each other by sharing information, opinions, and thoughts about products and brands (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In addition, they can access product or brand-related sustainability information, which other consumers make available, in the form of comments, reviews or blogs (Saeed et al., 2012). These opinions, comments, and sharing of personal, product sustainability-related experiences on social media empower consumers to make more informed choices (Saeed et al., 2012). Consumers consider social media comments as a more trustworthy source of information about products and services compared to corporate-sponsored communications through traditional promotion channels (Ek Styven & Foster, 2018; Foux, 2006). For these reasons, social media has become a primary platform for consumers in conducting information searches and making purchasing decisions (Appel et al., 2020).

Given these realities, it is not surprising that brands are now considering social media platforms over other methods for interacting with consumers, building brand-consumer relationships, and facilitating consumer decision making (Kim & Ko, 2010; Pentina et al., 2018). Brands have also realized that these platforms motivate consumers to interact with them which in turn lead to brand equity, positive Word-of-Mouth (PWOM), and brand loyalty (Ko & Megehee, 2012). Consequently, many brands have integrated social media into their marketing strategies to promote their products (Ali et al., 2023).

Moreover, brands are actively considering the exposure and reach offered by social media platforms (Colleoni, 2013) and leveraging these channels to transparently

disclose their sustainability initiatives (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013) and engage with audiences in real-time (Lee, 2017). Through social media, they are promoting the value of sustainability and communicating their commitment to sustainable practices by sharing relevant information to a wider audience (Lee, 2017).

However, this improved access to information also introduces inherent risks that can potentially harm a brand's reputation and overall standing (Eisele et al, 2017). As social media is a powerful platform for consumers to voice their opinions, the authenticity of anything posted on these platforms is highly scrutinized and any perception of fraud or insincerity can lead to a barrage of negative comments and discussions (Eisele et al, 2017).

This notion is reinforced by the findings of a study by Kim and Ko (2010), which indicates that sharing information and opinions on social media is of utmost importance for customers as it greatly impacts their support toward a brand. The content posted on social media platforms plays a pivotal role in shaping their choices and preferences when it comes to following and engaging with brands (Kim & Ko, 2010). Customers also use social media to voice their disagreements and let other people know about their actions (Kim & Ko, 2010).

Hence, when a brand engages in unethical conduct such as greenwashing, individuals tend to be more inclined to disseminate information about the brand's negative actions on social media (Soltani et al., 2023). Through their tweets or posts, they shape public perception and promote the circulation of this information (Soltani et al., 2023).

Consequently, it may attract broad attention and participation, and ultimately evolving into mass backlash (Soltani et al., 2023).

2.3 Greenwashing:

As brand have started embracing the 'green' trend (Lim et al., 2013), there has also been an increase in unethical practices, such as making exaggerated or false claims about the green qualities of their products. This behavior has become so widespread that it has been coined with the term “greenwashing.” (Lim et al., 2013). The term "greenwashing" is used to describe superficial and ecologically insignificant information provided by some products, brands, and companies (Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001).

Greenwashing is a practice where companies present a positive corporate image by providing misleading information about their environmental practices that significantly differ from their actual actions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), for example, they might proclaim sustainability while simultaneously investing in coal projects. This gap between consumer expectations of the brands and their actual actions leads consumers to become skeptical about the authenticity of the brands (Vos, 2014; Furlow, 2010).

When consumers feel skeptical about the environmental qualities of green products, they are likely to assess them less favorably (Chang, 2011). They increasingly question whether these brands are truly environmentally responsible or if they are simply making such claims without a genuine commitment to sustainability (Parguel et al., 2011; Furlow, 2010). As a result of this uncertainty in determining the authenticity of a brand's

sustainability claims, the awareness of greenwashing practices lead them to suspect the brands' sustainability efforts and distance themselves from the brands engaging in greenwashing (Furlow, 2010; Lim et al., 2013). In addition, they engage in anti-brand activities such as spreading negative word of mouth, and publicly complaining about the brand (Kucuk, 2019).

While greenwashing has been a significant concern; the advent of social media has aggravated the issue by enabling consumers to rapidly disseminate information (Stross, 2011) about greenwashing practices to wide audiences (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). With easy access to a brand's or product's environmental information online, consumers now have the power to accuse brands of greenwashing publicly through social media posts, comments, and online reviews (Kucuk, 2019).

When consumers become aware that a brand is using social media to disseminate false and misleading messages (Topal et al. 2020) and deceiving its consumers, they are likely to share this information with others and warn them about the deceptive practices (Chen et al., 2014). They share their negative experiences and inform other consumers to be more cautious while purchasing green products (Lim et al., 2013). This collective effort raises skepticism among consumers, potentially influencing others to avoid the products or brands.

2.4 Word-of-Mouth (WOM):

The importance of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) in influencing consumer decision-making has been widely acknowledged in marketing and advertising literature (Engel et al., 1969; Gilly et al., 1998, Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). WOM refers to the informal,

verbal communication between individuals regarding the products or services of a brand or organization (Zhang et al., 2018; Eisingerich et al., 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011). WOM can be either positive or negative. Positive Word-of-Mouth (PWOM) is a consumer's response to satisfaction whereas negative Word-of-Mouth (NWOM) is a consumer's response to dissatisfaction (Richins, 1984). Both PWOM and NWOM serve as influential forms of information sharing (Zhao & Xie, 2011).

However, the influence of WOM extends beyond mere information sharing; it encompasses trust and credibility in the eyes of consumers (Chu & Kim, 2011; Phelps et al., 2004; Mohr et al., 2001). This inherent trust in WOM stems from the personal and authentic nature of recommendations received from friends and family, who are perceived as credible and unbiased sources of information compared to traditional media, such as print ads, radio, and TV (Salazar et al., 2013). As a result, consumers are more likely to act upon these recommendations when making their purchase decisions (Zhao & Xie, 2011). This reliance on WOM underscores its significance as the most powerful force that exerts substantial impact on consumers compared to other forms of marketing communication (Day, 1971).

Furthermore, the technology advancements and the widespread use of digital platforms have transformed the way people exchange information and opinions about products and brands, leading to the emergence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth or eWOM (Cheung & Lee, 2012). eWOM occurs when consumers exchange information online, and it can be observed in various forms, such as social media comments, posts, and online product reviews (Doh & Hwang, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

While both WOM and eWOM share the fundamental purpose of disseminating information and recommendations, eWOM transcends physical boundaries, enabling instantaneous sharing of opinions and recommendations with a potentially vast online audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). For example, consumers can now openly share positive or negative experiences concerning products or brands on social media platforms, reaching thousands of people within a second (Fu et al., 2015). In a similar vein, if a brand engages in unethical practices like greenwashing, consumers can swiftly share this information to thousands of people via social media platforms (Soltani et al., 2023). They can influence those people to form a negative opinion about the brand (Kucuk, 2019), further discouraging them to purchase that brand (Zhang et al., 2018).

This phenomenon is further underscored by the fact that when consumers find a brand's green claims unclear and unreliable, they tend to speak negatively about the brand and prefer not to purchase it (Khwaja et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2014). According to Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), consumers can become increasingly susceptible to others' opinions and behaviors when faced with ambiguous situations. Thus, when consumers are uncertain about a brand or product, they seek information from other consumers to make informed consumption decisions (Mohr & Webb, 2005).

Henceforth, when consumers observe a substantial amount of positive eWOM regarding a product or brand, it fosters positive expectations, encouraging them to make a purchase of that brand (See-To & Ho, 2014). Conversely, encountering a considerable volume of negative eWOM about a product or brand may lead to negative expectations and subsequently diminish consumer's intention to purchase that brand (See-To & Ho, 2014).

Based on that it can be postulated that, when consumers are unsure about whether a brand's sustainability initiative is authentic or not, they rely on other consumers' opinions to accurately perceive and evaluate a brand's sustainability efforts. When they see positive social media comments about a brand's sustainability initiative, they are likely to consider the brand as sustainable and make a purchase of that brand. Similarly, if they encounter negative social media comments surrounding the brand's sustainability practices, they may develop doubts or skepticism about the brand's commitment to sustainability.

2.5 Social identity:

Past research shows that consumers respond differently to products or brands based on their social identity (White et al., 2012). Tajfel (1972) conceptualized social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership". When someone strongly identifies with a group, he / she holds positive attitudes toward that group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and is willing to propagate a positive group image (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Bhattacharya et al, 1995).

Similarly, when consumers strongly identify with a brand, they are likely to hold positive attitudes toward the brand and express a willingness to promote a positive brand image. They evaluate products more favorably when the product is linked to an aspect of their social identity and personal values (Atkinson & Kim, 2014; Forehand & Deshpande', 2001) and are less inclined to interact with brands that diverge from their social identity (Arli & Dietrich, 2017).

As consumers increasingly interact with brands on social media, brand messages that signal shared values and identities can lead to positive implications such as PWOM and increased purchase intentions. For example, Borin et al., (2013) found that green messages shared by the brands significantly influence consumer purchase intentions for pro-environmental consumers but not otherwise. Conversely, when the social media campaigns of a company or brand do not align with consumers' values and beliefs, it can lead to negative implications such as decreased purchase intention and NWOM.

A significant aspect of social identity that influences a consumer's purchasing decision is his/her self-concept (Sirgy,1985). Self-concept encompasses individuals' thoughts and emotions regarding themselves in relation to others within a socially determined context (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987). Moreover, individuals try to enhance their self-concepts by behaving consistently with their actions, statements, commitments, and beliefs (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). They protect or reaffirm their self-concept by avoiding any connection with a brand that does not align with an aspect of their social identity (White et al., 2012; White & Argo, 2009; Zinkhan & Hong, 1991).

In alignment with this, it can be discerned that a core underlying reason as to why consumers are motivated to purchase brands that align with their social identity and avoid brands that are not aligned is the need to maintain or protect a positive self-concept. For example, consumers who strongly identify as pro-environmentalist support brands that align with their social identity and self-concept as environmentally responsible individuals. Conversely, they may choose not to purchase brands known for their involvement in greenwashing to protect and reaffirm their self-concept. Building on this,

it can be inferred that consumers' response to a brand's sustainability effort can be influenced by their motive to maintain a positive self-concept.

Individuals are frequently motivated to conform to others' beliefs and behaviors to enhance, protect, or repair their self-concept (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For example, when consumers witness other consumers endorsing Patagonia, a brand known for its strong commitment to sustainability and environmental conservation (Hwang et al., 2016), they might be motivated to purchase Patagonia's products in order to portray themselves as environmentally conscious individuals. In contrast, if other people accuse Patagonia of greenwashing, then consumers may avoid purchasing from the brand as associating with this brand would undermine their self-concept as an environmentalist.

Expanding on this observation, it can be predicted that when pro-environmental consumers see other consumers supporting a brand's sustainability initiatives on social media, then this could signal to consumers that they can enhance their self-concept as an environmentalist by purchasing the brand. In contrast, if an individual does not identify as an environmentalist, the opinions of other consumers in this context should not impact their purchase intentions. Similarly, if consumers encounter negative social media responses accusing a brand from green washing, then pro environmentalists should avoid the brand to protect their self-concept, whereas such backlash should not impact consumers who do not identify as environmentalists to the same degree.

2.6 Value congruence:

Value congruence refers to the degree of similarity between consumers' personal values and their perceptions of a brand's values (Edwards & Cable, 2009). It serves as a

symbolic driver that influences consumers' actions toward a brand (Cazier et al., 2017). Past research suggests that consumers are more inclined to purchase a brand or product whose values align with their own (Cazier et al., 2017). Conversely, they are less likely to purchase brands whose values are incongruent with their own (Cazier et al., 2017). For instance, consumers who prioritize environmental concerns are more likely to purchase an eco-friendly car that aligns with their values and avoid a car known for its harmful environmental impact.

Considering this significant impact of value congruence on consumers' preferences for brands or products and its role in shaping customer-brand relationships (Sirgy, 1982; Torelli et al., 2012), brands actively cultivate a shared set of values with their consumers and effectively communicate this alignment to them (Lee & Jeong, 2014; Tuskej et al., 2013; Ahearne et al., 2005). By doing so, brands aim to foster a sense of closeness and personal relevance to their consumers (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008), enhancing their connection to the brand and potentially leading to increased loyalty and a positive brand perception (Cazier et al., 2017).

Similarly, when promoting their sustainability initiatives, brands seek to align their values with those of pro-environmental consumers, the intended target audience for these initiatives (Han & Xu, 2020). By highlighting their commitment to sustainability, brands signal that they share the same values as these consumers (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). This alignment of values strengthens the connection between the brand and pro-environmental consumers as they are more likely to support and engage with brands that demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainable practices.

However, this alignment can be disrupted when pro-environmental consumers encounter social media backlash toward those sustainability claims. Upon witnessing the social media backlash, they might become uncertain about whether the brand is genuinely promoting sustainability or merely engaging in greenwashing practices. As mentioned earlier in the literature, consumers seek information from other consumers (Mohr & Webb, 2005) and become susceptible to other people's opinions (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), when faced with uncertainty, they are likely to be influenced by the social media backlash as well. Consequently, they might perceive a misalignment between their values and those of the brand's, which could then decrease their intention to purchase the brand.

Stated formally, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability claims will lead to reduced purchase intentions for consumers with a pro-environmentalist identity but not otherwise.

H2: The aforementioned effect will be mediated by the extent to which consumers perceive an alignment between their values and the brand's values.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study provides a test of my theorizing that social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability claims will lead to reduced purchase intentions for consumers with a pro-environmentalist identity but not otherwise (H1). I also tested that this effect will be mediated by the extent to which consumers perceive an alignment between their values and the brand's values (H2).

To test these predictions, participants were exposed to an initial Tweet from a fictitious clothing brand promoting its sustainability efforts. Subsequently, they were presented response tweets, varying in terms of positivity or negativity. The context of this study was based on real examples of brands that offer consumers environmentally friendly products, prioritizing sustainability by utilizing materials sourced exclusively from eco-friendly sources such as recycled materials (Ehram, 2016).

3.1 Participants and Procedure:

A total of 533 participants were recruited through MTurk (55.9% Female; $M_{age}=69.30$, $SD=45.11$) and randomly assigned to one of three social media response conditions: positive comment, negative comment, and a control condition consisting of positive and negative comments, which is labeled as a mixed consensus condition. The mixed consensus condition was provided as a baseline to determine whether any observed shift could be attributed to the negative comments or positive comments. This control condition helped to isolate the impact of each type of comment on consumers' responses by testing whether the negative comments differed from the baseline control condition.

Participants were first presented with a Tweet from a fictitious clothing brand promoting its commitment to sustainability by initiating a clothing line made of 100% sustainable material (see MDA). A fictitious brand was used to help control for prior brand relationships. For the social media backlash manipulation, I presented participants' tweets that responded either positively or negatively to the brand's message from 6 Twitter users (see MDA).

Based on pretests (see MDA), the backlash was manipulated by incorporating positive and negative words such as “Awesome,” “Great” versus “Doubt,” “Fake.” (e.g., “your sustainability efforts are awesome” versus “your sustainability initiatives are not good enough”). The pre-test showed that the tweets differed in terms of perceived approval versus disapproval toward the brand but did not differ in terms of other factors such as perceived emotionality (see MDA for more details).

After viewing the stimuli, participants indicated their purchase intention (“I would shop at this retailer;” “I would visit this retailer;” 1=Strongly disagree and 7=Strongly Agree; $\alpha=.95$; Kermani et al., 2023). Next participants indicated their feelings of value congruence to the target brand (“I like what this brand stands for”; “In general, my values and the values held by the brand are very similar”; “I believe in the same values promoted by the brand”; 1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree; $\alpha=.96$; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003).

Following this, participants indicated the degree to which they perceived that the responses were reacting negatively to the advertisement as a manipulation check (“To what extent were these comments an expression of disapproval toward the

advertisement.”; “To what extent did these comments respond negatively to the advertisement.”; 1= Not at all, 7=Very much so; $\alpha=.95$). Finally, the participants indicated their pro-environmentalist identity (“Environmental protection reflects an important part of who I am”; “Environmental protection is closely connected to my identity”; “I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can to prevent climate change”; 1=Strongly disagree and 7=Strongly Agree; $\alpha=0.94$; Cook et al., 2002 and Sparks & Shepherd, 1992) and answered a series of demographic items.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

4.1 Initial Analyses:

The social media response manipulation was effective. An ANOVA for perceived negativity of the responses as a function of the social media responses was significant ($F(2, 521) = 259.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .50$). Participants perceived the negative tweets to be more negative ($M = 5.87$) compared to the mixed consensus ($M = 4.26, p < .001$) and the positive tweets ($M = 2.07, p < .001$). The mixed consensus and positive tweets were also significantly different ($p < .001$). Additionally, the distribution of responses suggested the sample was mixed in terms of their pro-environmental identity, with some participants expressing stronger pro-environmental identity, while others expressed a weaker pro-environmental identity ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.77, \text{Skewness} = -0.25, \text{Kurtosis} = -.84$).

4.1.1 Purchase Intention:

A regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between social media responses (dummy coded), pro-environmental identity (continuous), and their interaction on purchase intention. The effect of social media responses when comparing the negative comments to the mixed consensus condition was not significant ($\beta = -.56, t(5, 522) = -1.26, p = .21$). Similarly, the effect of social media responses was significant when comparing the negative comments to the positive comments ($\beta = 2.44, t(5, 522) = 7.43, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the effect of environmental identity on purchase intention was also significant ($\beta = .31, t(5, 522) = 4.12, p < .001$).

However, these effects were qualified by a social media response x environmental identity interaction when comparing the negative comments to the mixed consensus comments ($\beta=.19$, $t(5,522)=1.97$, $p=.048$) and when comparing the negative to positive comments ($\beta=.38$, $t(5,522)=3.73$, $p=.002$). As predicted, spotlight analyses indicated that the negative comments compared to the control comments increased purchase intentions when participants held a strong environmental identity (+ 1 SD above the mean; $\beta=0.69$, $t(5,522)=2.44$, $p=.015$).

A similar effect was found when comparing the negative comments to the positive comments (+ 1 SD above the mean; $\beta=1.26$, $t(5,522)=4.53$, $p<.001$). There were no social media response effects amongst those who did not hold a pro-environmental identity when comparing the negative comments to the control condition and the positive comment condition (- 1 SD below the mean; $\beta= -.17$, $t(5,522) = -.62$, $p=.53$ and $\beta= -.41$, $t(5,522) = -1.39$, $p = .17$).

4.1.2 Value congruence:

A regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between social media responses (dummy coded), pro-environmental identity (continuous), and their interaction on value congruence. The effect of social media responses when comparing the negative comments to the mixed consensus condition was not significant ($\beta= -.43$, $t(5, 516) = -1.11$, $p=.27$). However, the effect of social media responses was significant when comparing the negative comments to the positive comments ($\beta=2.51$, $t(5, 516) = 9.04$, $p<.001$).

Furthermore, the effect of environmental identity on value congruence was also significant ($\beta=.32$, $t(5, 516) = 5.07$, $p<.001$). These effects were qualified by a social media response x environmental identity interaction when comparing the negative comments to the mixed consensus comments ($\beta=.18$, $t(5,516) = 2.08$, $p=.038$) and when comparing the negative to positive comments ($\beta=.42$, $t(5,516) = 4.88$, $p<.001$). As predicted, spotlight analyses indicated that the negative comments compared to the control comments increased consumers' connection to the brand when participants held a strong environmental identity (+ 1 SD above the mean; $\beta=.69$, $t(5,516) =2.92$, $p=.004$).

A similar effect was found when comparing the negative comments to the positive comments (+ 1 SD above the mean; $\beta=1.51$, $t(5,516) =6.51$, $p<.001$). There were no social media response effects amongst those who did not hold a pro-environmental identity when comparing the negative comments to the control condition and the positive comment condition (- 1 SD above the mean; $\beta= -.04$, $t(5,516) = -.16$, $p=.87$ and $\beta= -.21$, $t(5,516) = -.91$, $p= .36$).

Finally, I conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Hayes, 2018, Model 8; bootstrapped with 20,000 draws) to determine whether the perception of increased value congruence could account for the observed consensus \times pro-environmentalist identity interaction on purchase intentions. The results revealed a significant index of moderated mediation when comparing the negative comments to the control condition (Index=.15; $CI_{90} = [.011, .30]$) and the negative comments to the positive comments (Index=.36, $CI_{95} = [.21, .51]$).

There was a significant conditional indirect effect of social media responses on purchase intention via value congruence for participants that indicated a pro-environmental identity when comparing the negative comments to the control condition ($\beta=.59$; $CI_{95}=[.08, 1.11]$) and the positive comment condition ($\beta=1.32$; $CI_{95}=[.87, 1.78]$). The mediation effect of value congruence was not significant amongst those who did not hold a pro-environmental identity when comparing the negative comments to the control condition ($\beta= -.02$; $CI_{95}=[- .35, .32]$) and the positive comment condition ($\beta= - 0.12$; $CI_{95}=[- .44, .20]$).

4.2 Summary of the results:

This study supports my theorizing that when a brand makes a claim about being sustainable and faces backlash on social media, consumers with a strong environmental identity are less likely to purchase the target brand. This occurs because these consumers experience a decreased feeling of value congruence with the brand. In comparison, no such effect was found amongst consumers who did not hold an environmental identity. Thus, suggesting that social media backlash has an impact on consumers' intention to purchase a brand that promotes sustainability, specifically when those consumers are committed to environmentalism.

Interestingly, the results suggested that positive comments can have the opposite impact on environmentalists in that it can enhance their intentions to purchase a brand that promotes sustainability. Subsequently, providing evidence that consumers with a strong environmental identity are highly susceptible to social media responses to a

brand's sustainability promotion and that such comments can impact their perceptions of value congruence with the target brand and their purchase intentions.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This research examined the effects of social media backlash expressed toward a brand's sustainability claims and found that such backlash leads to reduced purchase intentions. These effects are observed primarily among consumers with a pro-environmentalist identity but not otherwise. Also, the study showed that value congruence mediated the effects of social media backlash. Overall, these findings are consistent with the idea that social media backlash expressed toward a brand's sustainability claims can lead consumers with a pro-environmental identity to reduce their intent to purchase, due to a decreased perception of value congruence. Conversely, individuals without environmental concerns were not affected by social media backlash.

Furthermore, the current research suggests that positive social media comments expressed toward a brand's sustainability claims lead to increased purchase intentions compared to a mixed consensus (a mix of positive and negative comments). These effects are primarily observed among consumers with a pro-environmentalist identity but not among those without such environmental concerns. This finding underscores the significant impact of both positive and negative comments in influencing the purchase intentions of pro-environmental consumers. Moreover, the study indicates that positive social media comments, compared to a mixed consensus, can enhance the perception of value congruence for consumers with a pro-environmental identity, thereby increasing their intent to purchase the brand. Conversely, individuals without environmental concerns were not influenced by the positive comments in this context.

5.1 Theoretical implications:

The current research primarily offers theoretical contributions to the literatures on sustainable marketing, social media backlash, greenwashing, and value congruence. There are also some broader implications for research concerning the effects of negative brand information in the form of more standard forms of WOM (e.g., negative social media responses). This research is intended to make a primary contribution to the existing sustainable marketing literature.

Prior research suggests that when consumers perceive that a brand is greenwashing, their attitude toward the brand changes (Chen et al., 2014) and they engage in NWOM (Hameed et al., 2021). They engage in NWOM in order to persuade other consumers to dislike the brand (do Paço, & Reis, 2012) and avoid purchasing it (Lim et al., 2013). However, there has been no research to date examining how consumers who encounter such social media backlash will respond. This research contributes to this area by demonstrating that social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability claims can persuade consumers with strong pro-environmental identity to avoid purchasing the target brand. Specifically, this study suggests that negative social media responses can decrease consumers' purchase intention compared to positive social media responses and a mix of both positive and negative social media responses (i.e., control condition).

In addition, past research suggest that brands attempt to foster a feeling of value congruence with their target consumers in order to positively influence their perception of the brand (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). Similarly, for pro-environmental consumers who care about the environment, brands aim to signal that they share the same values (Kintu

& Ben-Slimane, 2020) and position their marketing activities accordingly (Wallach & Popovich, 2023). However, there has been no research to date examining how consumers' feeling of value congruence with brands that promote sustainability can be influenced by the opinions of others. This research contributes to this area by indicating that social media backlash can decrease consumers' perceptions of value congruence with brands.

Specifically, the findings of this study indicate that when pro-environmental consumers encounter negative social media responses about a brand's sustainability initiatives from other consumers, it led them to perceive a misalignment between their own values and those promoted by the brand, subsequently resulting in decreased purchase intention. This study also suggests that the susceptibility to others' opinions may stem from the fact that pro-environmental consumers have limited information about whether a brand's sustainability claims are genuine; therefore, they seek alternative sources of information, particularly other consumers' reactions, to make accurate judgments.

5.2 Managerial implications:

Beyond the stated theoretical implications, this study offers a number of implications for marketing practitioners. This study suggests that social media backlash directed at a brand's sustainability claims can significantly influence pro-environmental consumers, who are the target audience of such claims. Namely, this can lead to feelings of value incongruence and decrease purchase intentions. As consumers can be uncertain whether a brand's sustainability claims are genuine, the social feedback provided by other consumers appears to be highly persuasive to pro-environmental consumers. It is

noteworthy that the negative comments presented to participants in this study accused the brand of greenwashing without providing any evidence as to why this was the case (e.g., “We know you don’t care about the environment!”). Despite this, these accusations resulted in deleterious consequences for the brand. Hence, this highlights the importance of brands in ensuring that their sustainability claims are transparent and do not conflict with their other practices to avoid accusations of greenwashing, as prevention is the best strategy to counter backlash (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020).

Additionally, this research underscores the importance for brands to proactively monitor and address negative social media responses to mitigate further escalation of the backlash after it occurs. While preventing backlash is crucial, it's equally important to address it after it occurs to ensure that any negative impact is minimized, and the brand's reputation is preserved. Hence, brands need to mitigate it by promptly addressing the concerns raised on social media and providing transparent explanations. This could involve engaging with consumers directly on social media platforms, clarifying any misunderstandings, issuing a sincere apology, and taking corrective actions when necessary.

Additionally, brands should outline a clear plan of action to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future. They should adopt a transparent, honest, and accountable approach in communicating their ongoing sustainability efforts to address concerns raised by consumers. By emphasizing both prevention and post-occurrence management strategies to effectively navigate and mitigate the challenges posed by social

media backlash, brands can uphold their reputation and ensure that their commitment to sustainability remains clear, even in the face of potential criticism.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study underscore the importance of generating and promoting positive social media comments about a brand's sustainability initiatives. It suggests that positive social media comments can be equally impactful as negative ones and positive social media comments around a brand's sustainability efforts can enhance consumers' purchase intentions. Past research has also emphasized the significant influence of positive information shared by individuals about products on consumer preferences and decision-making (Zhang et al., 2018). In light of this, brands should make concerted efforts to generate positive social media comments and actively promote those positive comment. For example, by replying to positive social media comments in real-time and creating a dedicated social media post to highlight the positive comments. By proactively seeking and highlighting positive social media comments, brands can effectively engage with their target audience and build a strong foundation of support that can help mitigate the impact of potential backlash.

CHAPTER SIX: FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Future research:

The growing understanding that social media backlash presents a serious challenge for today's brands, highlights the need for additional research to better understand this problem and explore effective solutions. There is a lot more to unpack about the relationship between social media backlash and consumer behavior, including the crucial aspect of understanding whether consumers' reactions differ when no backlash is observed. Also, it is important to understand how brands should respond to backlash. Therefore, future research should examine the impact of different response strategies, such as apologies, justifications, or corrective actions, to see if these could effectively mitigate the backlash and minimize potential damage to the brand's reputation and consumer perceptions.

Additionally, the impact of the credibility of the source expressing social media backlash on shaping consumer responses needs to be explored. The social media commenters in the study were anonymous and there was no information about their identity. It would be valuable to explore how the findings might change if commenters were identifiable as pro-environment or not, or if they were public figures such as influencers or celebrities. For example, the backlash arising from environmental activists in response to a brand's sustainability initiatives is anticipated to be more detrimental than that from general public who lack such apparent affiliation or expertise in environmental matters. Future research could explore how a social media commenter's identity might influence the impact of social media backlash on their purchase intention.

In addition, it is worth considering the temporal aspects of social media backlash on consumer perceptions, such as the duration of negative comments' visibility to individual consumers as this might have an impact on consumer responses toward the brand. For example, if negative comments about Patagonia's sustainability issues are prominently displayed on social media for an extended period (e.g., remain unaddressed by Patagonia), they may have a stronger influence on consumers, potentially leading to a negative impact on their response toward the brand. However, it is also possible that consumers could become desensitized to these negative comments, thinking that there are so many positive and negative comments that it is easier to simply ignore them. Conversely, if these negative comments are short-lived or less visible (e.g., got hidden or deleted by Patagonia), consumers may be less affected or not affected at all by them. Given these circumstances, empirical research is needed to validate these predictions and help brands understand the actual impact of visibility duration on consumer responses to social media backlash.

Another limitation of this study is that the findings only suggest that social media backlash leads to decreased purchase intention; actual purchasing behavior is not directly observed. While purchase intention is often a strong predictor of actual purchase behavior, the correlation between these two is not perfect (Cazier et al., 2017). Owing to this, future research that examines actual purchasing behaviors in response to social media backlash is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its impact. This would bridge the gap between theoretical intention and actual consumer actions, offering insights into how social media perceptions translate into tangible market outcomes.

Given that the brand used in this study was fictitious, with participants having no pre-existing knowledge of it, we were able to isolate the impact of social media backlash on consumer responses without the confounding influence of real brand relationships. Real brands often come with a history of product quality, customer service, and overall reputation, which can significantly affect consumer perceptions. Additionally, established brands may have ongoing social media marketing strategies, sustainability initiatives, or CSR efforts that contribute to consumers' overall perceptions. But this did not happen in this study due to the use of a fictitious brand. Even though this allowed for a clearer focus on the direct effects of social media backlash on consumers' purchase intentions, it would be interesting to explore scenarios involving well-known brands, where participants have established associations or prior knowledge. For example, it would be worth exploring how people react to a brand with established loyalty, such as Patagonia, compared to a brand with a less positive reputation, such as H&M. Future research should investigate the nuances of social media backlash within the context of established brands, exploring how real-world factors such as existing brand perceptions, brand loyalty, brand reputation, and sustainability claims might influence the relationship between such backlash and consumer behavior. Future research could also explore whether consumers would be influenced by other people's comments in such situations.

Additionally, the sample was recruited using MTurk. MTurk data is considered reliable and more representative of a general population than a typical student sample (Mason & Suri, 2012). Therefore, it has been used frequently in empirical studies (Mason & Suri, 2012). However, the specific MTurk sample used in this study had a relatively older age profile ($M_{\text{age}} = 69.30$). While the older age of the sample does not pose a concern

for the internal validity of the conceptual model, future research should explore whether the findings can be generalized to a more diverse sample that includes a wider age range.

Lastly, the findings of this study suggest that when pro-environmental consumers are uncertain whether a brand's sustainability claims are genuine, negative social media responses can persuade them to doubt the authenticity of the brand's sustainability claims. As previously stated, the negative comments presented to participants in this study accused the brand of greenwashing without providing any evidence to support these accusations. (e.g., "You are polluting the world!"). Nevertheless, these comments fostered skepticism among the pro-environmental consumers about the authenticity of the given brand's sustainability claim and strongly influenced their intention to purchase it. Hence, future research should further explore the dynamics between consumer perceptions of authenticity in sustainability claims and the role of social media in shaping these perceptions. It would be beneficial to investigate how brands can effectively communicate their sustainability efforts in a way that resonates with their target consumers' values, particularly in the face of skepticism and increased awareness of greenwashing.

6.2 Conclusion:

Past research suggests that brands have the power to influence societal norms and drive social change (Moorman, 2020). Consumers also now expect brands to bring social change by engaging in sustainability initiatives and act as a force to make the world a better place to live (Wallach & Popovich, 2023). However, social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability claims can significantly alter this expectation. The present study

reveals that social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability claims can have detrimental effects on pro-environmental consumers, leading them to perceive a misalignment between their values and the brand's values as well as resulting in reduced purchase intentions. The study also suggests that, due to such backlash, consumers may begin to doubt the authenticity of the brand's commitment to sustainability. Consequently, this doubt can weaken a brand's efforts to promote social change because if consumers do not see the brand as authentic, they are less likely to follow its lead on sustainability issues.

Furthermore, the widespread occurrence of greenwashing on social media platforms (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013) has led consumers to closely scrutinize brands' sustainability claims and hold brands accountable if their sustainability claims are perceived as insincere or inadequate. This scrutiny is further amplified by the fact that along with brand's marketing messages, consumers now encounter opinions, reactions, and discussions of other people on social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The present research suggests that when pro-environmental consumers encounter negative social media comments about a brand's sustainability initiatives, it creates uncertainty among them, leading to a decline in the credibility of the brand's commitment to sustainability. These trends have raised the need for more research. In addition, brands are now increasingly willing to take sustainability initiatives (Seyfang, 2004) and this increasing willingness among brands has the potential to drive significant changes in both managerial practices and societal outcomes (Moorman, 2020).

Overall, it has become imperative for brands to understand how to navigate the complexities of social media backlash with strategic precision, ensuring that their

sustainability efforts are communicated as being authentic, transparent, and well-aligned with their target consumers' values. Focusing on authentic sustainability efforts and clear communication strategies can lead to a more sustainable future, encouraging both consumer support and social progress. Ultimately, the path forward involves not only understanding but also addressing the multifaceted challenges presented by social media backlash, laying the groundwork for more resilient and impactful brand strategies in the realm of sustainability.

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Methodological Details Appendix (MDA)

The impact of social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability initiatives on pro-environmental consumers' purchase intentions

Table 1. Contribution and Comparison of Most Closely Related Research						
Paper	Social Media Backlash	Observer of Social Media Backlash	Construct(s) Studied	Primary Outcome(s)	Primary Mechanism(s)	Summary
Chen et al., 2014	No	No	Green brand image, green satisfaction, and green trust.	Green brand equity	Green brand image	Green brand image affects green brand equity, and this effect is partially mediated by green satisfaction and green trust.
Hameed et al., 2021	No	No	Greenwashing, green brand image, green brand love, and green brand loyalty.	Green purchase behavior	The effects of greenwashing	Green brand image, green brand love, and green brand loyalty positively affect green purchase behavior, whereas they are

						negatively influenced by greenwashing
do Paço, & Reis, 2012	No	No	Environmental concern, green advertising, skepticism, and green claims.	Skepticism toward green advertising	Environmental concern and skepticism toward green advertising.	Individuals who are more environmentally concerned are more skeptical about green claims and women are more skeptical regarding green advertising than men.
Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020	Yes (Scandal backlash caused by social media influencers)	Yes (Negative Associations)	Scandal backlash, social media influencer, brand association,	Brand responses to scandal backlash	Proactive dissociation, reactive dissociation, mimetic dissociation,	Some impacted brands responded to the scandal backlash by dissociating from the accused social media influencer, while

			deviance, or wrongdoing.		absence of response.	others chose not to respond at all.
Lim et al., 2013	Yes (Negative Word-of-Mouth)	Yes (Deter other consumers from purchasing)	Green offerings, greenwashing,	Consumer purchasing behavior.	The effects of exposure to greenwashing	When consumers realize the existence of greenwashing, they develop a sense of distrust, adopt a more cautious approach to future purchasing behavior, and spread awareness of its existence to other consumers through word-of-mouth communication.

Zhang et al., 2018	Yes (Negative Word-of- Mouth)	Yes (Deter other consumers from purchasing)	Green marketing, greenwashing, consumers' green purchasing intentions, green word-of-mouth (WOM), and green concern.	Consumers' green purchasing intentions	Consumers' greenwashing perceptions.	Consumers' greenwashing perceptions have both direct and indirect negative impacts on green purchasing intentions, and green concern strengthens the negative relationship between greenwashing perceptions and green purchasing intention
Wallach & Popovich, 2023	No	No	Sustainability initiatives, perceptions of authenticity,	Consumers' attitudes and behaviors	Consumers' perception of brand's size and profit-centricity.	Consumer assessments of sustainability initiatives can lead to perceptions of inauthenticity in

			brand commitment, and third-party certification.	toward the brand.		dominant brands, and this perception of inauthenticity can negatively influence consumer attitudes and behaviors toward the brand.
Cazier et al., 2017	No	No	Value congruence, trust, purchase intention, reservation prices.	Purchase intention and reservation price.	Value congruence and online trust	Value congruence increases consumer trust, and both factors directly affect purchase intention and reservation price.

Oppong-Tawiah & Webster, 2023.	No	No	greenwashing, value congruence, trust, and financial market performance.	Identification of greenwashing and the effect of greenwashing and financial market performance for firms	Linguistic cues in social media communications.	Greenwashing on social media negatively impacts firms' financial market performance.
Lyon & Montgomery, 2013.	Yes	Yes (Positive impact: reduction of corporate greenwash)	Social media, greenwashing, corporate environmental communications.	Impact of social media on corporate greenwash, the differences between social media and traditional	Incidence of corporate greenwash.	Social media is likely to reduce the incidence of corporate greenwashing, as social media enables greater transparency and accountability compared to traditional media and can lead to corporate

				media in the context of greenwashing, and how corporate environmental communications may backfire.		environmental communications backfiring if perceived as excessive self-promotion.
Kim & Ko, 2010	Yes (Word-of-Mouth)	No	Social media marketing (SMM), customer relationships (involving intimacy and	Purchase intention and customer relationships (intimacy and trust)	Entertainment, customization, interaction, Word of Mouth (WOM), and trend.	SMM positively impacts the relationship between customer relationships (intimacy and trust) and purchase intention.

			trust), luxury fashion brands.			
Present Research	Yes	Yes (Reduced purchase intention)	Brand's sustainability initiatives, greenwashing, Negative Word-of-Mouth (NWOM).	Consumers' purchase intentions	Pro-environmental identity and value congruence.	Social media backlash toward a brand's sustainability claims reduces purchase intentions among pro-environmental consumers, moderated by their perception of value congruence.

Section A: Supporting Information for the Study

Stimuli and procedure

All participants were provided the following information about the survey session:

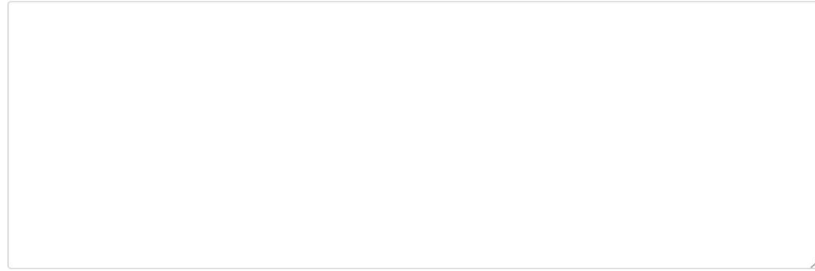
“In this section, you will be presented a Twitter advertisement for **Modern Fashion**. Modern Fashion is a clothing retailer. Please view this advertisement carefully”

Participants Instruction:

Please carefully view the ad below and provide your thoughts. You have 2 minutes to provide your thoughts. If you are done early or if you had no thoughts, you can continue to the next page.



Please describe your thoughts about this advertisement.



Participants were also asked how they feel about the advertisement.

Overall, how do you feel about this advertisement?

Unfavorable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Favorable
Negative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Positive
Bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Good

Afterwards, participants moved on to the next page, where they were presented the brand's tweet and randomly assigned to view tweets from 6 Twitter users that responded either positively or negatively to the brand's message (image of the tweets below). Participants were then asked to describe their thoughts about the tweets.

Participants Instruction:

Now we are going to show you a series of social media comments that were randomly selected from a broader subset of comments. Please view these comments carefully as there will be ensuing questions related to them.

Positive Tweets



Heath @finleyheath
replying to @modernfashion
Your sustainability efforts are awesome!



Paul @paulcarder
replying to @modernfashion
100% sustainable materials! Really into it!



StephanieWhitney @whitneysteph
replying to @modernfashion
This is just brilliant!



Mitchell @mitch_anderson
replying to @modernfashion
It's so great that you care about the environment.



Erin @coultererin
replying to @modernfashion
You are making the world greener!



Joa_nne @joannegill
replying to @modernfashion
Keep it up! Will keep buying your products!

Negative Tweets



Heath @finleyheath
replying to @modernfashion
Your sustainability initiatives are not good enough!



Paul @paulcarder
replying to @modernfashion
100% sustainable materials! Highly doubt it!



Erin @coultererin
replying to @modernfashion
You are polluting the world!



Mitchell @mitch_anderson
replying to @modernfashion
We know you don't care about the environment!



StephanieWhitney @whitneysteph
replying to @modernfashion
This is a false claim!



Joa_nne @joannegill
replying to @modernfashion
Unbelievable! Won't be buying your products again!

Please describe your thoughts about these social media comments.

You have 2 minutes to provide your thoughts.

If you are done early or if you had no thoughts, you can continue to the next page.

All participants were then directed to respond to a questionnaire capturing their purchase intention to Modern Fashion (7 items; Kermani et al., 2023)

Please imagine that **Modern Fashion** opened a retail store near you.

With this in mind, please respond to the following statements and indicate your agreement using a 7 point scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 7= Strongly Agree).

1. I would shop at this retailer.

1. Strongly Disagree	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. I would visit this retailer.

1. Strongly Disagree	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. It is very unlikely that I would shop at this retailer.

1. Strongly Disagree	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Next the participants indicated their feelings of value congruence to Modern Fashion (7 items, Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003).

Perceptions of Value Congruence

1. I like what this brand stands for.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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2. In general, my values and the values held by the brand are very similar.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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3. I believe in the same values promoted by the brand.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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4. I want to avoid being associated with this brand.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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5. This brand reflects who I do not want to be.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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6. I would avoid identifying with this brand.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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Following this, participants indicated the degree to which they perceived that the responses were reacting negatively to the advertisement as a manipulation check (7 items).

To what extent were these comments an expression of **disapproval** towards the advertisement.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent were these comments an expression of **approval** towards the advertisement.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent did these comments respond **negatively** to the advertisement.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent did these comments respond **positively** to the advertisement.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Finally, the participants indicated their pro-environmentalist identity (7 items, Cook et al., 2002 and Sparks & Shepherd, 1992) and answered a series of demographic items.

Perceptions of Pro-environmentalism

Please read the following questions carefully and indicate your response using a 7 point scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 7= Strongly Agree).

1. Environmental protection reflects an important part of who I am.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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2. Environmental protection is closely connected to my identity.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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3. I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can to prevent climate change.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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4. I don't feel strong ties with people who want to protect the environment.

1. Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/>	2. <input type="radio"/>	3. <input type="radio"/>	4. <input type="radio"/>	5. <input type="radio"/>	6. <input type="radio"/>	7. Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/>
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Demographic Information

Pretest Information

An initial pretest (N = 220) among the same population was conducted to assess the degree to which the tweets elicited varied responses. 10 tweets were used to run the pretest, and among those, six tweets turned out to be showing accurate results. The backlash was manipulated by incorporating positive and negative words in the tweets such as “Awesome,” “Great” versus “Doubt,” “Fake” (e.g., “your sustainability efforts are awesome” versus “your sustainability initiatives are not good enough”).

All participants were provided the following information:

“Now we are going to show you a series of social media comments that were randomly selected from a broader subset of comments. Please view these comments carefully as there will be ensuing questions related to them.”

Afterwards, participants moved on to the next page, where they were presented with 10 tweets in random order (positive and negative) and asked to indicate the degree to which they could relate to the tweets (7 items; Kermani et al., 2023).

Positive tweets



Heath @finleyheath

replying to @modernfashion

Your sustainability efforts are awesome!



Monique_98 @moniquejoseph

replying to @modernfashion

This is environmentally friendly!



Paul @paulcarder

replying to @modernfashion

100% sustainable materials! Really into it!



StephanieWhitney @whitneysteph

replying to @modernfashion

This is just brilliant!



Mitchell @mitch_anderson

replying to @modernfashion

It's so great that you care about the environment.



Erin @coultererin

replying to @modernfashion

You are making the world greener!



Eric @Er_dunhil

replying to @modernfashion

I really like what you guys do!



Joa_nne @joannegill

replying to @modernfashion

Keep it up! Will keep buying your products!



George @williamgeorge

replying to @modernfashion

Looks like a baby step towards a better future!



LisaSmith @smith_lisa

replying to @modernfashion

You are setting a great example!

Negative tweets



Heath @finleyheath

replying to @modernfashion

Your sustainability initiatives are not good enough!



Monique_98 @moniquejoseph

replying to @modernfashion

This is not environmentally friendly!

-  **Paul** @paulcarder
replying to @modernfashion
100% sustainable materials! Highly doubt it!
-  **StephanieWhitney** @whitneysteph
replying to @modernfashion
This is a false claim!
-  **George** @williamgeorge
replying to @modernfashion
Looks like a fake gesture with no real impact!
-  **Joanne** @joannegill
replying to @modernfashion
Unbelievable! Won't be buying your products again!
-  **Eric** @Er_dunhil
replying to @modernfashion
I don't like that you guys claim yourself sustainable!
-  **Erin** @coultererin
replying to @modernfashion
You are polluting the world!
-  **Mitchell** @mitch_anderson
replying to @modernfashion
We know you don't care about the environment!
-  **LisaSmith** @smith_lisa
replying to @modernfashion
You are misleading people!

Participants were given the following information:

“In this section, we would like to ask a series of questions related to the **tweet in response to the advertisement by Modern Fashion**. Please proceed to the next page”.

To what extent did this Twitter user believe the sustainability claim made by the brand was authentic.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent did this Twitter user believe the sustainability claim made by the brand was misleading.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent was this Twitter user emotional.

1. Not at all	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7. Very much so
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The pre-test showed that the 6 tweets differed in terms of perceived approval versus disapproval toward the brand ($p < .001$) but did not differ in terms of other factors such as perceived emotionality ($p > .001$). Additionally, the distribution of responses suggested the sample was mixed in terms of their pro-environmental identity, with some participants expressing stronger pro-environmental identity, while others expressed a weaker pro-environmental identity ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.40$, $Skewness = -0.62$).

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Researchers: Dr. Saeid Kermani and Mohinur Akter

Date: January, 2024

Study Name: Perceptions of Marketing Material

Purpose of the Research: This research examines your perceptions of brands and their marketing material.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: You will be presented a series of social media responses to an advertisement. You will then be asked to rate your attitudes and perceptions of these comments. It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete this study.

Risks and Discomforts: We do not foresee any risks from your participation in the research beyond what you might normally expect to experience when viewing marketing content. However, some people may find the content as somewhat offensive or unpleasant.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, Trent University, or any other group associated with this project. Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. All responses will

be collected by computer. Your data will be securely stored on a password protected computer and only research staff/research team members will have access to this information. The data will be stored indefinitely and archived on the investigator's computer. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact saeidkermani@trentu.ca This research has received ethics review and approval by Trent University and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the saeidkermani@trentu.ca.

By selecting "I consent" you are indicating you have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. You are not waiving any legal rights by selecting "I consent."

- o I Consent
- o I Decline