

## ABSTRACT

HOOD, SARA LEWIS. Exploring the Impact of Consumer-Defined Sustainable Fashion Attributes on Generation Z Consumers' Attitudes, Behavioral Intentions, and Consumption Behaviors. (Under the direction of Dr. Kristin Thoney-Barletta).

The purpose of this study was to examine the various consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Additionally, this study sought to understand how motivational drivers and barriers influence consumers' desire to purchase sustainable fashion goods and to share about those purchases with their peers. In Part I of this study, qualitative focus groups were conducted and recordings were manually transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify meaningful patterns, which resulted in the identification of four key themes. *People, Planet, and Profit* encompasses the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that participants identified as their top priorities. *Managing Your Expectations* relates to shifts in the consumer mindset and attitude that occur if a particular brand possesses certain attributes. *Specificity is Key* addresses the impact of sustainable attributes on consumers' purchase decision-making behavior, including the roles of consumer education and consumer trust. Finally, *Thanks, I Thrifted It!* provides an exploration of consumers' green signaling behavior related to their sustainable fashion purchases.

Part II of this study aimed to expand upon the findings from Part I using a quantitative research methodology. A survey was developed and distributed online to a sample population of Generation Z consumers aged 18-26 (N = 153). Data were cleaned and coded using JMP Pro 17 software, then SmartPLS 4 was used for hypothesis testing via partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This analysis resulted in the identification of several significant effects among the studied variable, including the effect of consumers' desire for green signaling

on their sustainable apparel purchase intentions, online sharing intentions (eWOM), and in-person sharing intentions (WOM). Consumers' desire for uniqueness was also found to have a direct effect on their in-person sharing intention regarding sustainable apparel, and consumers' willingness to pay a premium was found to have a significant direct effect on their sustainable apparel purchase intention. Consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands was also found to have a direct effect on their attitude towards sustainable apparel consumption, and their attitudes were found to have a direct effect on their purchase intention. Finally, consumers' attitudes toward sustainable apparel were found to totally mediate the effect of consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands on their sustainable apparel purchase intention.

Findings from this study contribute to the larger body of literature on sustainable fashion consumption among Generation Z consumers, identifying the attributes that young consumers prioritize and the impact of these attributes on their attitudes and purchase intentions. Additionally, this study provides valuable insights that support the growing body of literature on Berger's (2019) green signaling theory. Anecdotally, Generation Z consumers indicated that their desire to signal status drove their sustainable fashion consumption; these findings were supported by the direct effects of green signaling on sustainable apparel purchase intention and online (eWOM) and in-person (WOM) sharing intention identified in Part II. Finally, this study has significant implications regarding the effect of consumers' trust of sustainable brands on their sustainable apparel purchase intention. Part I of this study revealed that consumers' trust of sustainable brands influenced their attitudes toward sustainable consumption, and those attitudes shaped their consumption behavior. This effect was mirrored in observations from Part II, as consumer attitudes fully mediated the effect of consumer trust on their purchase intention towards sustainable apparel. Findings from this study provide a meaningful look into how

Generation Z consumers define and prioritize key attributes of sustainable fashion brands, as well as the motivational drivers and barriers that shape their purchase intentions, sharing intentions, and consumption behaviors specific to sustainable apparel.

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Exploring the Impact of Consumer-Defined Sustainable Fashion Attributes on Generation Z  
Consumers' Attitudes, Behavioral Intentions, and Consumption Behaviors.

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my boys: my husband Michael, whose love and partnership empowers me to be my best self; my son Callum, the light of my life and a source of constant joy, inspiration, and companionship through many hours of reading, writing, and data analysis; and my pup Coach, who has sat – quite literally – by my side through five years of graduate school. It's an honor to share this life (and this accomplishment) with those I love most.

## BIOGRAPHY

Sara Lewis Hood is the daughter of David and Angie Lewis and was raised in Goldsboro, North Carolina. She moved to Raleigh in the fall of 2015 to attend NC State University, where she was a Park Scholar and member of the University Scholars Program. She graduated summa cum laude in May 2019 with a B.S. in Fashion and Textile Management – Brand Management and Marketing and minors in Business Administration and Sociology. In August 2019, Sara began graduate school at NC State University, working with Dr. Kristin Thoney-Barletta as a teaching and research assistant. She earned her Master of Science in Textiles degree in May 2021, completing her thesis on understanding the role of Instagram in young adult consumers' purchase and post-purchase evaluation behaviors. She matriculated into the Textile Technology Management Ph.D. program in the Wilson College of Textiles at NC State as a Provost's Doctoral Fellow in August 2021. During her time as a doctoral student, Sara worked alongside Dr. Lori Rothenberg and Dr. Kristin Thoney-Barletta as a teaching and research assistant. She also served as the instructor of record for two undergraduate courses and presented research at several conferences. She currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her loving husband Michael, their son Callum, and their dog Coach.

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I want to begin by extending sincere gratitude to Dr. Kristin Thoney-Barletta, whose constant support as an advisor, mentor, and committee chair have shaped me into the student and researcher I am today. I have grown tremendously over the past five years, due in no small part to Dr. Thoney-Barletta's willingness to share her wisdom and brilliance with me. I also want to acknowledge the work of my wonderful committee, Dr. Lori Rothenberg, Dr. Delisia Matthews, and Dr. Marguerite Moore. Dr. Rothenberg's statistical expertise has been invaluable in the completion of this project, Dr. Moore's support throughout the participant recruitment process was a tremendous help in getting this project off the ground, and Dr. Matthews' excellence in qualitative research was incredibly impactful as I conducted the first focus groups of my career. It has been an honor to learn from each of these individuals and I will be eternally grateful for the lasting impact they have had on my life and my career.

I also want to acknowledge my family, beginning with my parents; their constant support and encouragement over the last decade has meant the world to me as I have learned, grown, and continuously repeated, "just one more semester..." Attending my parents' alma mater and making my own mark at NC State has been a privilege, and I will always be grateful for the love of learning (and the love of the Wolfpack) that they instilled in me from an early age. I want to acknowledge my 'co-authors,' Coach and Cal, who have provided emotional support and companionship through committee meetings, focus groups, and late-night writing sessions; this accomplishment feels like it belongs to them as much as it belongs to me. Finally, I want to thank my husband, Michael Hood, who is always willing to lend an ear when I need to read a chapter aloud or talk through findings to try and make them make sense. Your love and support have carried me through many, many years of schooling, and I am deeply grateful.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Sustainable fashion has risen to prominence in the apparel industry over the last decade, and young adult consumers have been a major force behind the increase in consumer demand for sustainability and corporate social responsibility in fashion. A 2022 survey of adults in the United States found that, “only one in five (20%) Americans ages 18-34 do not think about sustainable fashion, compared to 27% of Americans ages 35-54 and 42% ages 55+” (“U.S. Attitudes,” 2022, para. 3). 64% of surveyed U.S. consumers age 18+ stated that they were at least somewhat knowledgeable about the sustainability efforts of the companies they shop from and 55% of consumers were willing to pay more for sustainable goods; however, when asked about their consumption priorities, 81% of consumers chose product quality over sustainability, and 68% of consumers chose price over sustainability (Smith, 2022a).

Understanding how to shop sustainably for apparel can be overwhelming for consumers; after all, what makes a product sustainable? The term ‘sustainable fashion’ is used to describe fashion goods from a multitude of sources, from fast fashion brands using more eco-conscious materials to slow fashion companies and certified B-corporations. Various attributes have previously been defined as identifiers for sustainable businesses, including - but not limited to - ethical sourcing of materials, payment of fair wages to laborers, safe working conditions in manufacturing, and transparency in supply chains (Henninger et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study, the focus was on the sustainability efforts of three different types of fashion businesses: (1) socially sustainable or mission-driven, ‘ethical’ fashion businesses, (2) environmentally sustainable or eco-conscious fashion businesses, and (3) economically sustainable fashion businesses, including those that primarily sell secondhand or vintage apparel.

These categories align with the traditional pillars of sustainability, which, “provide a holistic framework for addressing complex sustainability matters” (“What do the three,” 2021, para. 1).

The connection between these pillars can be seen below in Figure 1.1.



**Figure 1.1.** Three Core Pillars of Sustainability

The three core pillars of sustainability seen in Figure 1.1 provide a logical framework through which to examine the attributes of sustainable fashion and their appeal to modern-day consumers.

Based on the aforementioned core pillars of sustainability, three different types of sustainable fashion businesses were used to frame the qualitative portion of this study and its exploration of the sustainable fashion attributes that influence consumers’ attitudes and consumption behaviors related to sustainable fashion goods. These businesses included socially

sustainable or 'ethical' fashion businesses, environmentally sustainable or 'eco-friendly' fashion businesses, and economically sustainable businesses, including those which sell secondhand or vintage goods to consumers in support of the circular economy and increased longevity of garments. These attributes were then used in aggregate to explore the motivational drivers, barriers, and global motives that shape consumers' purchase and sharing intentions related to sustainable fashion goods. Understandably, different consumers have different priorities in terms of the attributes that they are looking for in a sustainable fashion garment; as such, it is important to understand these unique perspectives for the sake of developing a deeper understanding of today's consumers and the ways that sustainable fashion brands can effectively market their products toward consumers who have different priorities. Further research on the unique attributes that consumers associate with each of these types of businesses, as well as the impact of variables like green signaling, consumer trust of sustainable fashion brands, and consumer attitudes toward sustainable fashion brands, provides both theoretical and practical insights on consumer behaviors in the sustainable fashion industry.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the various consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Additionally, this study sought to understand how motivational drivers and barriers influence consumers' desire to purchase sustainable fashion goods and to share about those purchases with their peers. Few prior studies were found that effectively defined or characterized different attributes of sustainable fashion businesses from a consumer perspective, particularly as it relates to the effect of these attributes on consumers' attitudes and purchase behaviors related to sustainable fashion

goods. Research on the concept of ‘green signaling,’ or status signaling specifically in the realm of sustainable products, is also relatively new, and there is a lot of potential for discovery in this area of research. This study aimed to help fill these gaps in the existing literature, an important contribution in a time when sustainable fashion goods are growing increasingly more popular among consumers in the United States.

### **1.3 Theoretical Foundation and Research Objectives**

#### **1.3.1 Research Objectives**

The theoretical foundation for this study stemmed from a combination of behavioral reasoning theory, status signaling theory, and the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model of consumer decision-making behavior, each of which provided the basis for the research objectives that shaped this study. The research objectives that were established for this study are as follows:

**RO1:** To define the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that are important to young adult consumers in their alternative evaluation and purchase decision-making processes

**RO2:** To understand the impact of sustainable business practices on consumers’ attitudes and consumption behaviors

**RO3:** To understand the role of status and/or green signaling in consumers’ purchase behavior related to sustainable fashion goods

**RO4:** To evaluate the impact of various motivational drivers and barriers on consumers’ purchase and sharing intention related to sustainable fashion goods

These objectives were used in the development of research questions for the qualitative portion of this study and provided directional support for reviewing literature and in the development of study hypotheses, creation of the moderator guide, and design of the quantitative research instrument.

### 1.3.2 Introduction to Theoretical Background

The EKB model is considered to be an industry standard model for consumer decision-making and consists of five key stages: (1) Need or Problem Recognition, (2) Information Search, (3) Alternative Evaluation, (4) Purchase, and (5) Post-Purchase Evaluation (Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell, 1968). For the purposes of this study, the alternative evaluation and purchase stages were deemed most relevant. When looking to shop sustainably, evaluating alternative products and their attributes is a key step taken by consumers to ensure that the most sustainable options are selected, from grocery store goods and cleaning products to building materials and apparel (“Ultimate Guide,” 2022; “Identifying Greener,” 2022; “Product Substitution,” 2019; Davis, 2022). A desire to understand how different sustainable product attributes influence consumers’ alternative evaluation and purchase decision-making processes served as the foundation for RO1.

Westaby (2005) developed behavioral reasoning theory based on the previously-established theories of reasoned action (TRA) and planned behavior (TPB). Generally, behavioral reasoning theory asserts that a consumer’s ‘reasons’ are linked to their beliefs and values and serve as underlying factors in their purchase intentions and behaviors (Westaby, 2005). Research on consumers’ reasons for purchasing sustainable goods has become more popular in recent years, aligning with the rise in popularity of sustainable goods among consumers in the United States. Petro (2022) noted that, “a desire to help the environment was found to be the primary reason consumers purchase sustainable products and brands,” (para. 9). Understanding the reason(s) both for and against consumers’ purchase of sustainable fashion goods has significant implications both theoretical and practical. From a managerial perspective, understanding which reason(s) are most important to consumers can help businesses to target

their consumers more effectively by directly appealing to the reasons that are most important to them and/or most influential in terms of affecting their attitudes and purchase intentions. From a theoretical standpoint, the model of behavioral reasoning theory provides a valuable lens through which the motivational drivers and barriers of consumer behavior can be explored, particularly in terms of their impact on consumer attitudes, purchase intention, and sharing intention; these potential implications served as the basis for **RO2** and **RO4**.

The final theoretical element in the foundation of this study is the concept of status signaling, wherein consumers utilize tangible goods as indicators of an intangible quality that elevates social status; in the case of fashion goods, these tangible indicators are often of wealth or luxury (Kaufman, 2020; Wang and Wallendorf, 2006). More recently, the concept of 'green signaling' has entered the research realm as an expansion on the original signaling theory specific to sustainable goods. Berger (2019) found that, "subjects exhibit a higher willingness to pay for green products when the product choice (a nongreen product vs. a costlier green counterpart) is public rather than private," indicating that a product's sustainable attributes carry a level of status among consumers that is desirable (pg. 233). Understanding the degree to which a consumer's desire to signal status via sustainable fashion goods influences their purchase decision-making behavior and their attitudes toward sustainable fashion businesses served as the basis for **RO3**.

## **1.4 Conclusion**

Chapter 1 establishes the basis for this study, highlighting the relevance and timeliness of this research and outlining the study's purpose and research objectives. Chapter 2 provides an overview of extant literature pertaining to the theoretical background of this study, as well as foundational literature on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors related to sustainable

apparel. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology and outcomes from Part I of this study, which explores the consumer-defined attributes of sustainable apparel and their impact on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors using a qualitative focus group methodology. Chapter 4 builds upon findings from Part I of this study, employing the use of a quantitative study methodology to further explore the motivational drivers and barriers that impact Generation Z consumers' sustainable apparel purchase and sharing intentions. Finally, Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion of findings from Parts I and II of this study, including theoretical and managerial implications, relevant limitations, and opportunities for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Background of the Study

The theoretical foundation for this study was comprised of a combination of three prominent theoretical perspectives: the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model of consumer decision-making, Westaby's (2005) behavioral reasoning theory, and the theory of green signaling, established by Berger (2019) as an expansion on status signaling theory (Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1968). Justification for the inclusion of each of these theories in the study framework is established below.

#### 2.1.1 The Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) Model of Consumer Decision-Making

The Engel-Kollat-Blackwell model of consumer decision-making was developed based on the stages of John Dewey's (1910) problem-solving process and consists of five key stages: (1) need or problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) purchase, and (5) post-purchase evaluation (Darley, Blankson, & Luethge, 2010; Engel et al., 1968). More recent studies have established the influence of both environmental factors, including the values, lifestyle, and culture of reference groups, and individual characteristics like personal motives, values, personality, and product knowledge on the consumer decision-making process; additionally, the advent of the digital age has also resulted in the introduction of online factors into consumers' decision-making processes (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1999; Wen, 2012; Park & Cho, 2012). For the purposes of this study, the primary focus was on the alternative evaluation and purchase decision stages of this process.

Alternative evaluation is a process wherein consumers study the attributes of a given set of products, with the ultimate goal of selecting the one that is best suited to meet their needs or solve their problems. Simon (1955) established that in the alternative evaluation process, an

individual seeks to meet some minimum criteria with their selection and makes their decision based on which choice best satisfies those criteria. Once an acceptable alternative has been identified, consumers often move into the purchase stage of decision-making; in this stage, the item is obtained and then evaluated via post-purchase behaviors. There are two noteworthy errors that may be made in this stage of the decision-making process: (1) an individual rejects a superior alternative (Type I Error) or (2) an individual accepts an inferior alternative (Type II Error) (Knudsen & Levinthal, 2007). In the context of shopping and consumption behavior, these errors are most often identified later on in the decision-making process, once a purchase has been evaluated and a level of satisfaction – or lack thereof – has been determined.

In the field of sustainable fashion, much of the alternative evaluation research has been specifically focused on evaluating aspects of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), including supplier selection, order allocation, and other business operations-specific decisions (Zhong et al., 2022; Poh & Liang, 2017; Jia et al., 2015; Wang, Yang, & Cheng, 2019). Other recent studies have explored sustainable consumption behaviors in the time of COVID-19, seeking to understand which aspects of sustainability were of most importance to consumers during this unique time in global history and how COVID-19 shifted consumer preferences in relation to textiles and apparel (Brzustewicz & Singh, 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2023). Few studies were found that explored the influence of sustainable fashion attributes on the alternative evaluation and eventual purchase decision-making processes of U.S. consumers; this study aimed to fill that gap in the literature through an exploration of the attribute(s) that influence consumers' purchase decision-making behaviors related to sustainable fashion. The Engel-Kollat-Blackwell model of consumer decision-making is widely regarded as a reputable model

for consumer decision-making, particularly within the apparel industry, making it an appropriate choice for this study.

### **2.1.2 Behavioral Reasoning Theory**

Behavioral reasoning theory is a theoretical model developed by Westaby (2005) as an expansion on the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior. “The overarching theoretical proposition in behavioral reasoning theory (BRT) states that reasons serve as important linkages between people’s beliefs, global motives (e.g., attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control), intentions, and behavior” (Westaby, 2005, p. 98). Reasons are also presumed to impact global motives and intentions, which are, “broad, substantive factors that consistently influence intentions across diverse behavioral domains,” in addition to their impact on individual behaviors (Westaby, 2005, p. 98). In developing this theoretical framework, Westaby (2005) established clear, significant connections between consumers’ beliefs, values, and attitudes and their purchase intentions and behaviors; these linkages have been evaluated extensively in other literature and will serve as the basis for this study.

In their review of extant literature on the behavioral reasoning theory, Sahu, Padhy, and Dhir (2020) found that the foundations for this theory originated in a multitude of different theoretical models, including the theory of planned behavior (TPB), theory of reasoned action (TRA), cognitive dissonance theory, decisional balance theory, and field theory, among others. Bringing these theoretical models together allows for several key affordances, including more accurate consumer insights and better-explained variances in purchase intention and behavior than those provided by TRA and TPB. The components of BRT – values, reasons, and global motives – were also found to help scholars better understand consumers’ behavioral mechanisms, and literature on BRT widely agrees that the theory is beneficial for understanding

context-specific behavioral decision making (Sahu et al., 2020). Previous literature on consumer behavior related to sustainable products has largely relied upon the theoretical frameworks of the theories of planned behavior and reasoned action, but more recent studies have expanded into the use of behavioral reasoning theory to study these consumer behaviors (Wei et al., 2017; Diddi et al., 2019; Bhalla, 2021; Markle, 2019; Park et al., 2017). Authors have also used behavioral reasoning theory in tandem with the theory of reasoned action and/or theory of planned behavior in the study of innovations in sustainability (An et al., 2021). Using prior studies as a reference point, this study expanded upon existing literature through the use of behavioral reasoning theory as a framework for understanding and comparing the motivational drivers and barriers that shape consumers' attitudes, purchase intentions, and sharing intentions regarding sustainable apparel.

### **2.1.3 Status and 'Green' Signaling Theories**

Status consumption is defined as, "consumption used to express social class position," and is a term that provides foundational support for status signaling theory in research literature (Üstüner & Holt, 2010, p. 37). Status consumption theory originated from Veblen and Simmel's trickle-down theory, which asserted that the desire for status symbols 'trickles down' the hierarchy of social class, with each class working to emulate the class above through the consumption of fashion products and other goods (Simmel, 1904; Veblen, 1899). This theoretical model has since been expounded upon, with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of consumer taste formation and Üstüner and Holt's (2010) evaluation of status consumption in less industrialized countries. The idea that consumer behavior is shaped by a desire to possess and/or to signal status to other consumers has been widely researched in the fashion realm; this theoretical framework has been especially relevant to luxury fashion research, as many studies explore

elevated status as a potential driver of luxury fashion consumption (Phau, Teah, & Chuah, 2015; Cunningham & Petzer, 2022; Aziz & Habib, 2017).

More recently, the concepts of status consumption and signaling have been applied to theoretical models specific to the consumption of sustainable goods in a theory known as ‘green signaling’ (Berger, 2019). Berger (2019) asserts that consumers have a higher willingness to pay for ‘green’ or sustainable products if those products are clearly recognized as ‘green’ by others, as evidenced by previous studies on the status level of green consumers (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Kohlová & Urban, 2018; Puska, 2018, as cited in Berger, 2019). Findings from this study conclude that, “adding a signaling benefit can indeed increase consumers’ willingness to purchase green products,” and that green consumerism is more driven by the desire to signal attributes like prosociality and trustworthiness instead of just status level in general (Berger, 2019, p. 242). Awuni and Du (2016) also identified social values and desire for status as potential motivating factors for young adults’ consumption of sustainable products. Few studies were found that evaluated the various attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that may contribute to the status such products signal in the marketplace; this study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the attribute(s) of sustainable fashion that carry status in the minds of consumers and how a desire for green signaling influences consumer attitudes towards sustainable fashion products and their purchase and sharing intentions related to sustainable fashion goods.

## **2.2 Sustainable Fashion Conceptual Background**

### **2.2.1 Defining Sustainable Fashion**

The sustainable fashion industry has grown considerably over the last two decades as consumers have become increasingly aware of social, environmental, and economic issues that

plague the fashion industry (Henninger, Alevizou, & Oates, 2016; Moretto et al., 2018). The term ‘sustainable fashion’ is often used interchangeably with terms like ethical fashion, slow fashion, organic, green, fair-trade, and eco-fashion, a fact which creates confusion among consumers (Carey and Cervellon, 2014). While there are many existing definitions of sustainable fashion in the industry, ranging from true ‘slow fashion’ made sustainably from seed to garment to fast fashion products made with eco-conscious materials, consumer education on this topic has increased, as has their willingness to seek out the products that meet their particular sustainability criteria (Henninger et al., 2016; Diddi et al., 2019). For the purpose of this study, ‘sustainable fashion goods’ are those which have been produced using environmentally and socially responsible practices, including - but not limited to - ethical sourcing of materials, payment of fair wages to laborers, safe working conditions in manufacturing, and transparency in supply chains (Henninger et al., 2016).

### **2.2.2 Core Pillars of Sustainable Fashion**

Sustainability is a complex concept that comprises many different elements and is described in many different ways throughout the literature. Generally, sustainable practices are those which, “meet the present needs of consumers and businesses while also preserving or enhancing the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021, p. 562). For the purposes of this study, the framework of the three core pillars of sustainability – social, economic, and environmental – was employed when categorizing aspects of sustainable fashion that are of importance to modern-day American consumers. Sometimes referred to as the ‘triple bottom line’ of sustainability, these three core pillars (people, planet, and profit) are often depicted in a Venn diagram as seen in Chapter One, emphasizing the interconnectedness of each element in the overarching concept of sustainability (see Figure 1.1) (Elkington, 1994). It is

important to understand the distinct focus of each core pillar of sustainability in order to gain a holistic understanding of sustainability in the apparel industry; as such, each element is described in detail below.

### ***Environmental Sustainability***

In the textile and apparel industry, the term ‘environmentally sustainable’ refers to, “items produced and consumed through processes in which resources are not depleted or permanently damaged” (Kang, Liu, & Kim, 2013, p. 443). Technological advancements in the textile industry have resulted in the introduction of many innovative ways to conserve resources during apparel manufacturing, a process notorious for its resource demand. Tools like the Higg Index, a resource developed by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, and the MADE-BY Benchmark for Fibers have provided companies with an opportunity to examine the environmental impact of various stages of their product development and manufacturing processes (Khan and Islam, 2015; Laitala, Klepp, & Henry, 2018). Laitala et al. (2018) utilized the Higg Index and the MADE-By benchmark to study the environmental impact of product attributes like fiber type, garment cleaning and maintenance, and clothing lifespan, while Khan and Islam (2015) used the Higg Index to analyze the environmental sustainability of the materials and manufacturing processes involved in the production of a knit t-shirt. Both of these studies highlight the complex nature of garment life cycle analysis and the challenges that companies may face when seeking more environmentally sustainable alternatives to current materials or manufacturing processes. Some of the more environmentally-conscious practices identified by Khan and Islam (2015) included sourcing fair production, practicing transparency in the supply chain, selecting eco-friendly raw materials, utilizing clean production practices like

alternative or renewable energy sources, reducing chemical and water usage where possible, and introducing eco-friendly dyeing methods and environmentally low-impact or natural dyes.

In their study on strategic approaches to sustainability in the fashion supply chain, Macchion et al. (2018) categorized apparel companies' approaches to environmentally sustainable supply chain management (SCM) and identified three different types: (1) reactive, (2) proactive, and (3) value-seeking. Reactive companies were those investing 'minimal effort' towards sustainability, only adopting eco-friendly practices like reducing energy consumption to save money, to comply with legal regulations, and/or to preserve their reputation. Proactive companies were found to implement strategies beyond just compliance with governmental regulations; these practices ranged from establishing a sustainability office or team within their company to establishing environmental and social sustainability performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor their progress and even shifting towards the use of sustainable raw materials in 'capsule collections' that are produced alongside their traditional product offerings. Additional environmental sustainability practices implemented by these 'proactive' companies included the use of water- and energy-saving technologies, switching to eco-friendly product packaging, and thoroughly assessing suppliers and vendors to ensure compliance with sustainability regulations.

Most notably, 'value-seeker' companies were those who went above and beyond to build their company around a sustainable image. These companies produce only sustainable products, release sustainability and corporate social responsibility reports to the public, work to develop improved sustainable raw materials, and may seek out sustainability certifications to solidify their position as a truly sustainable business. Value-seekers, "[consider] all the ways in which a production process can have an impact on the environment (e.g. pollutants, the management of production waste, water and energy use, the consumption of other natural resources)," and strive

to minimize their carbon footprint throughout their supply chain (Macchion et al., 2018, p. 19). This study effectively demonstrated the range of environmentally sustainable actions that can be taken by fashion companies to improve sustainability across their entire supply chain (Macchion et al., 2018). Research has shown that consumers' pro-environmental attitudes significantly influence their intention to engage in sustainable fashion consumption; for this reason, it is important to understand the environmental attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and how these attributes may influence consumers' attitudes, purchase intention, and sharing intention related to sustainable fashion (Penz and Drewes, 2022).

### ***Social Sustainability***

The concept of socially sustainable or ethical consumption is defined as, "the avoidance of practices that are detrimental to other people, animals, or the environment" (Haug & Busch, 2016, p. 322). Socially sustainable fashion businesses, sometimes referred to as ethical or mission-driven fashion businesses, are those which prioritize corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a term which encompasses both the ethical operations and environmental sustainability of a company's supply chain (Choi, Feng, & Li, 2023). CSR became increasingly important in the apparel industry following the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory, an incident in 2013 which resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and garnered international media attention (Perry, Wood, & Fernie, 2015). Prior to this incident, much of consumers' attention in terms of sustainability was focused on the environmental impact of a particular business; afterwards, consumers' awareness of social issues in garment manufacturing became heightened. Human rights concerns like child labor, forced labor, unsafe working conditions, and unfair pay became increasingly important for companies to address transparently and ethical fashion businesses who prioritized these issues rose to prominence among consumers

(Gupta, Kumar, & Wasan, 2021; Perry et al., 2015; Bubicz, Dias Barbosa-Póvoa, and Carvalho, 2020).

To combat greenwashing, or the issue of false or non-transparent sustainability claims, in fashion, many ethical practices in the industry have been developed into certifications which brands can earn and display on their products. These certifications, which include FAIRTRADE markings, B-corporation certification, and ISO 14000 standard compliance, help consumers to identify which companies are truly abiding by ethical practices in running their business. Social sustainability in the fashion industry is unique in that both consumers and fashion industry leaders have a role in encouraging ethics in the fashion supply chain. While apparel companies have a more direct influence on their own ethical practices, consumers' increasing demand for ethically-made garments has an impact on how widely-available ethical fashion products become. Additionally, key players like high fashion providers and the media have the potential to significantly influence the fashion industry's ethical standards, as these parties often set the tone for whether ethical fashion is considered 'fashionable' (Haug & Busch, 2016).

Choi et al. (2023) noted in their study that the adoption of ethical operations is not always optimal for the retailer and their supply chain. They proposed a series of measures to encourage the adoption of ethical operations, including government support to reduce the cost of adopting such practices, enhancing public awareness of ethical operations in the fashion supply chain, and developing new technologies to reduce ethical production costs (Choi et al., 2023). Akbar and Ahsan (2021) also evaluated some of the challenges of implementing social sustainability initiatives in the apparel industry, namely a lack of top-level management support, factory capabilities, resources, and capacity, financial concerns like price pressure from buyers, limited financial support for implementation costs, and inadequate government infrastructure, and

cultural barriers like systemic bribery, corruption, and local disregard for regulations.

Additionally, this study reinforces the lack of monitoring and enforcement of established regulations as well as variance in buyer compliance requirements as barriers faced by companies looking to implement more ethical practices (Akbar & Ahsan, 2021).

Some organizations are working to improve regulations in support of workers' rights, like the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in New Delhi, India. Archana and Dickson (2017) conducted qualitative research in one of SEWA's embroidery centers, where they observed the efforts of the organization as they worked to empower and support homeworkers, subcontractors who are involved in the apparel supply chain and are often subject to exploitative practices. SEWA's livelihood promotion project, a management strategy which combines engagement with brands, detailed record keeping, hours-tracking, continuous monitoring, and other CSR procedures, has been deemed a CSR best practice and has significantly helped to improve the working conditions of homeworkers and to bring issues in this sector to light through increased visibility (Archana and Dickson, 2017). Consumer education also plays a critical role in increasing ethical practices in the fashion industry; research has demonstrated the importance of ethical practices in consumers' purchase decision-making processes, but many consumers still lack knowledge about these practices and the prominence of sweatshops and other social sustainability challenges in the apparel industry (Shen, Wang, Lo, & Shum, 2012). While it is not always easy to implement socially sustainable practices into apparel supply chains, current literature provides valuable insights into ways that corporations, governments, activist organizations, and consumers can provide support as brands work to overcome these barriers and educate consumers on the importance of ethical operations in the apparel supply chain (Choi et al., 2023; Akbar & Ahsan, 2021; Archana & Dickson, 2017; Shen et al., 2012).

In their evaluation of ethical and sustainable business development in the context of emerging economies, Gupta et al. (2021) identified several key practices that helped to support ethical and sustainable business development. The first of these practices was circular economy practices, which include reuse, recycling, and refabrication of existing products and resources; circular economic practices were found to have an indirect positive impact on societal development due to job creation and an overall improvement in societal wellbeing. Sustainable and cleaner production practices were also found to be critical to ethical and societal development. As previously mentioned, environmentally sustainable practices like energy and water conservation are beneficial from a corporate perspective for cost-reduction purposes, but the conservation of natural resources is also beneficial from a social perspective. This study effectively demonstrates the interconnectedness of the core pillars of sustainability and their potential impact on the development of consumers and businesses (Gupta et al., 2021).

### ***Economic Sustainability***

In terms of economic sustainability, one of the most prominent strategies in the apparel industry is the concept of the circular economy, which, “promotes new, cyclic ways of using and treating resources from an environmental and economic point of view and forms part of holistically adapting existing or creating new business models” (Beyer & Arnold, 2022, p. 32). Rooted in socially and environmentally sustainable practices, the circular economy highlights the importance of sustainability in economic development and growth. Research has established the connection between social and economic sustainability, with Sudusinghe and Seuring (2020) describing the ways that implementing social sustainability practices can improve the economic performance of a company. With that said, research has also shown that one of the most significant barriers to sustainable fashion consumption is that of cost; for this reason, it is

important for companies to strike a balance between establishing sustainable business practices to increase long-term profitability and providing products at a price point that their target market can reasonably afford (Sudusinghe & Seuring, 2020; Diddi et al., 2019; Kreuzer et al., 2019).

The advent of the circular economic model has resulted in global employment shifts within apparel value chains. Increasingly, job growth is being seen in reuse and recycling activities like secondhand apparel transport/sale and post-consumer materials processing, while employment in new apparel production and distribution has decreased (Repp, Hekkert, & Kirzherr, 2021). Secondhand apparel has become increasingly popular among consumers in recent years, and the consumption of secondhand clothing is generally more sustainable and fiscally responsible than the consumption of new apparel (Patwary et al., 2023; Lee & DeLong, 2021; Lin & Chen, 2022). While there are many elements involved in the circular economy and the associated cradle-to-cradle approach to thinking about a garment's lifecycle, our study will focus on secondhand apparel consumption as an economically sustainable option for modern consumers and the attributes of secondhand apparel that impact consumers' attitudes and intentions in economically sustainable fashion consumption.

## **2.3 Understanding Generation Z Consumers**

### **2.3.1 Generational Cohort Theory**

Since this study focused on the generalized behaviors of young adults aged 18-26 in the U.S., it is important to understand the impact of generational characteristics on individual consumers' attitudes and behaviors. Schewe and Meredith (2004) define generational cohorts as, "groups of individuals who are born during the same time period and travel through life together. They experience similar external events during their late adolescent/early adulthood years [and] these 'defining moments' influence their values, preferences, attitudes, and buying behavior in

ways that remain with them over their entire lifetime” (p. 52). These formative shared experiences create generational identities that serve as the basis for generational cohort theory, which suggests that each generation behaves in a manner that is unique in comparison to other generations. The population of this study comprises Generation Z consumers, a group that has recently emerged as a population of interest for many studies on sustainability and consumer behavior. For this reason, it is important to understand the defining characteristics of Generation Z and how those shape their attitudes, consumer perspectives, and intentions related to sustainable fashion consumption.

### **2.3.2 Characteristics of Generation Z Consumers**

Generation Z consumers are individuals born between 1997 and 2010; in 2023, these consumers are between the ages of 13 and 26 (Kondakciu, 2022). Due to the young age of members of this generation, much is still being discovered about these consumers, their defining characteristics, and their buying behaviors. Adults in Generation Z are often in a transitional phase of their life, beginning a job, starting college, or moving away from home, and their financial responsibilities are typically more limited than those of Generation Y (Kondakciu, 2022). Generation Z adults prioritize material splurges and entertainment experiences over long-term investments, differentiating themselves from older generations (Dubina, 2022). However, Generation Z has been disproportionately affected by pandemic-related job loss and other negative economic impacts in recent years, making it difficult to determine the true buying power and consumption habits of this generation (Kondakciu, 2022).

### **2.4 Young Adult Consumer Attitudes Toward Sustainable Fashion Consumption**

Research has demonstrated that there are generational differences in consumers’ attitudes toward sustainable fashion products, from socially responsible garments to eco-friendly products

and secondhand apparel. Consumer attitudes toward fashion products and brands are understood to impact their purchase decision-making behavior, making it important to understand consumer attitudes toward sustainable fashion for the purposes of this study. McLaren and Goworek (2017) identified a number of factors that influence consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion, including product quality and longevity, price, value for the money spent, brand trust, comfort, and ease of care. Researchers have also identified an attitude/intention-behavior gap among sustainable fashion consumers, particularly among Millennials; these consumers are some of the strongest supporters of sustainable fashion initiatives, but also regularly consume fast fashion products (Cesarina Mason, Palazzo, & Muhammad Umar, 2022; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; McNeill & Moore, 2015). In their exploration of the 'fast fashion conundrum' and sustainable fashion consumption, McNeill and Moore (2015) observed that a majority of participants were aware of the negative impact of fast fashion consumption from environmental and social sustainability perspectives, but that their behavior did not always align with their concern for environmental and social issues. Grazzini, Acuti, and Aiello (2021) observed a positive relationship between the incorporation of sustainable fashion attributes into product offerings and consumers' corresponding attitudes and purchase intentions; this effect was amplified in fast fashion products, with researchers noting that, "consumers in the fast fashion condition show greater purchase intentions when the product is sustainable compared to when the product does not present any sustainable attribute" (p. 7).

In their study of the attitude-behavior gap in the sustainable apparel industry, Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen young adult participants who were interested in fashion and had some level of familiarity with ethical fashion. This study found a few key factors that influenced consumers' attitudes toward ethical fashion and their

willingness to purchase these goods, including the ‘old-fashioned’ image associated with ethical fashion garments (as opposed to the more trendy product offerings of fast fashion brands), the high cost of sustainable fashion products, a lack of credible information about brands’ sustainable practices, and a lack of available ethical fashion options (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). With that said, more recent studies have indicated that this attitude/intention-behavior gap may be closing among Millennial consumers in particular. Cesarina Mason et al. (2022) explored the socially-responsible consumer behavior of Generation Y consumers who exhibit varying degrees of environmental attitudes (‘environmentalists,’ ‘medium-ENA,’ and ‘non-environmentalists’). This study found that the highest socially-responsible consumption behavior was exhibited by ‘environmentalist’ consumers with high participation in recycling (PIR), indicating a shift away from fast fashion consumption and towards sustainable fashion consumption among environmentally conscious consumers (Cesarina Mason et al., 2022).

Zhang, Zhang, & Zhou (2021) observed that cultural background and religious background played a significant role in explaining the differences in Generation Z consumers’ attitudes toward sustainability in fast fashion products. Additionally, their study found that consumers with higher income tended to value sustainability more and that Generation Z consumers with more awareness and knowledge of sustainability had stronger feelings about products with anti-sustainability attributes (i.e. fast fashion products) (Zhang et al., 2021).

Kovacs (2021) conducted interviews with 120 fashion consumers aged 18-25 to examine their perceptions and attitudes towards sustainable apparel. This study found that Gen Z consumers’ attitudes toward natural and organic fabrics were positive and that ecolabeling was a supported means of informing consumers about a product’s sustainable attributes. Additionally, “more than ninety percent of [these young adult consumers] had a positive attitude toward sustainable

selections and limited-edition clothes which are environmentally friendly” (Kovacs, 2021, p. 267). Generally, literature specific to Generation Z consumers is limited due to the young age of these consumers relative to the appropriate minimum age of sample populations for most studies (18 years old); as such, further exploration of young adult consumers’ attitudes toward sustainable fashion products with various attributes has the potential to add both theoretical and practical value.

## **2.5 Young Adult Fashion Consumption Behaviors**

Previous studies have explored various aspects of young adult fashion consumption behavior, including consumer personality traits like fashion consciousness, status consumption, and materialism (Kaur & Anand, 2018; Hammad et al., 2019). Consumer behaviors have shifted dramatically in recent years in response to changes in the U.S. market landscape that include technological innovations, increased social media and online shopping, inflation, and, most recently, the COVID-19 global pandemic and its associated impacts on the U.S. economy and shopping environment (Smith, 2022b). As the U.S. clothing market continues to stabilize post-pandemic, Smith (2022b) notes that a 7.4% increase in sales over previous years is expected in 2022, but much of this increase is due to inflation. Additionally, factors like global conflict and persistent supply chain issues are likely to impact consumers’ confidence in the economy and their willingness to spend disposable income on apparel (Smith, 2022b). Despite the economic impacts of inflation, one-third of Millennial and Generation Z adults are still likely to ‘splurge’ on non-essential items instead of saving their money (Dubina, 2022). There is a wealth of knowledge available on the fashion consumption behaviors of young adult consumers, but this study focuses specifically on research pertaining to sustainable fashion consumption.

### **2.5.1 Sustainable Fashion Consumption Behaviors**

### ***Defining Sustainable Fashion Consumption***

Kreuzer et al. (2019) define sustainable consumption as, “satisfying [one’s] own and others’ individual needs without compromising current and future generations in their [consumer] and ecological system” (p. 2). The concept of sustainable fashion consumption motives has been widely studied across various consumer groups and stages of the fashion consumption process including purchase, wear, and disposal (Lundblad and Davies, 2015; Diddi et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2022). Generation Z consumption of sustainable apparel was examined anecdotally through the qualitative portion of this study; extant literature pertaining to sustainable apparel consumption is found below in Chapter 2. Consumers’ behavioral intentions were the primary focus of the quantitative portion of this study, with purchase intention, in-person sharing intention, and online sharing intention serving as dependent variables in the theoretical model being tested. Literature specific to consumers’ purchase and sharing intentions was examined during hypothesis development for Part II of this study and is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

### ***Motivational Drivers of Sustainable Apparel Consumption***

Conversations surrounding motivations for sustainable fashion buying work in tandem with motivational drivers of fast fashion avoidance, as studied by Kim, Jung Choo, and Yoon (2012). Their research showed that key motives for fast fashion avoidance included poor performance, overly trendy styles, inauthenticity, and irresponsibility (Kim et al., 2012). These factors are often remedied by the supply chain practices used in the production of sustainable fashion goods, as demonstrated in the work of Lundblad and Davies (2015). Lundblad and Davies (2015) found that key consumer values motivating sustainable fashion consumption included self-esteem, self-expression, quality and long-lastingness, responsibility, support for the

environment, social justice, and a sense of accomplishment felt by the consumer. Their findings are echoed by Diddi et al. (2019), whose study on young adult consumers' sustainable clothing consumption intention-behavior gap revealed that consumers understand how personal choices can impact the environment. This study named several behavioral reasons why consumers engage in sustainable fashion consumption, including the perceived value and quality of the garments and their commitment to sustainability, which included both a care for the environment and respect for the workers who produce garments in today's fashion industry. However, the intention-behavior gap arises when young consumers are faced with budget constraints or a lack of available options, as well as rising skepticism about whether or not a company's sustainability claims are truthful (Diddi et al., 2019).

### ***Willingness to Pay for Sustainable Fashion Goods***

Sustainable fashion consumption has remained a top priority for many young adult consumers in recent years, despite their relative economic disadvantage compared to older generations. Dubina (2022) noted that, "more than half of Millennials (53%) and 44% of Gen Z [consumers]... say they try to buy more sustainable brand options even if it costs more" (p. 90). Lundblad and Davies (2015) interviewed sustainable fashion consumers with the intent to understand the values and motivations that drive their sustainable fashion consumption. A majority of their respondents (30 of 39) were under the age of 40 and would be considered young adults by most definitions. Their research showed that values like social justice, protecting the planet, and responsibility were all key drivers of sustainable fashion consumption, as were egoistic values like self-esteem, self-expression, and sense of accomplishment (Lundblad & Davies, 2015).

Sustainable fashion consumption involves the production, purchase, use, and disposal of apparel and footwear. Several studies have examined consumer behavior with regard to the different stages of the consumption process (Hassan, Yeap, & Al-Kumaim, 2022; Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Diddi et al., 2019). Young adult consumers have a distinct understanding of the impact that their personal choices can have on the environment, which directly affects their willingness to purchase sustainable clothing and to engage in other environmentally-conscious behaviors (Diddi et al., 2019). Sustainable fashion consumption research has also expanded into the practice of collaborative consumption, including fashion rental services and clothing libraries (Becker-Leifhold, 2018; Pantano & Stylos, 2020). For the purposes of this study, primary focus will be given to the purchase of clothing which was sustainably produced and distributed via direct or secondhand sale, and not to rental.

### ***Motivational Barriers Impacting Sustainable Fashion Consumption***

While there are obvious motivations for sustainable fashion consumption, particularly for young adult consumers, there are also noteworthy barriers faced by modern consumers. As previously mentioned, a lack of stylish or on-trend options can be a deterrent for young consumers. Additionally, buying less often or shopping secondhand can be less fulfilling for young consumers, though both options are theoretically more attainable than buying new, sustainably-produced goods at higher price points (Diddi et al., 2019). The most commonly mentioned barrier for young adult consumers in sustainable fashion literature is that of cost; studies have shown that the increased cost of sustainable fashion goods prevents consumers from converting their purchase intentions into purchase behavior (Diddi et al., 2019; Kreuzer et al., 2019). Understanding the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that are of most interest to young adult consumers has significant potential managerial implications, particularly as

businesses work to communicate the value of their products to consumers who may be hesitant to incur the costs associated with sustainable fashion goods.

### **2.5.2 Secondhand and Recycled Fashion Consumption Behaviors**

Studies have also explored the secondhand and recycled apparel consumption of Generation Z consumers. Traditionally, secondhand apparel consumption, “has been associated with financially marginalized consumers obliged to purchase used goods not of choice but from economic necessity” (Lo, Tsarenko, and Tojib, 2019, p. 287). With the rise in popularity of closed-loop manufacturing models in alignment with the circular economy, research is being conducted that explores consumers’ perceptions of recycled, rented, secondhand, and vintage products as well as their willingness to purchase these products (Diddi et al., 2019; Becker-Leifhold, 2018; Pantano & Stylos, 2020; Lin & Chen, 2022). Lin and Chen (2022) found that, “environmental consciousness strongly affected sustainable apparel purchase intention through perceived value” for Generation X, Y, and Z consumers (p. 9). With that said, the authors noted that, “the relationship between environmental consciousness and perceived value was significantly more positive for younger generations compared to Generation Xers” (Lin & Chen, 2022, p. 8). This study, like many others in this field, provides further support for the idea that younger consumers are more inclined to purchase sustainable fashion products than older consumers. With that said, Kovacs (2021) found that Generation Z consumers, “had a negative attitude towards secondhand clothes due to them having been ‘used by other people’ and they associated the shopping experience with negative emotional factors... [but] did not report having similar negative attitudes toward online secondhand shops” (p. 268). Few studies were found that explored Generation Z consumers’ attitudes towards secondhand shopping in bespoke or vintage

shops, and additional research on consumers' shifting perspectives toward secondhand apparel has the potential to provide valuable insights on a growing consumer market.

Secondhand shopping is largely understood to be one of the most sustainable forms of fashion consumption, and in the circular economy, methods of garment repair, reuse, and disposal are critical in extending the life of a garment. The work of McLaren and Goworek (2017) notes that, “[consumers] who were trend-driven would pass on or sell clothes before they wore out so that they could find replacements and keep up-to-date,” and that many of their participants had developed a hierarchy of disposal methods, selling more expensive items online, passing along good quality items to family or friends as ‘hand-me-downs,’ and donating any remaining items to charity shops (p. 185). This described hierarchy aligns well with the negative connotations that have traditionally been associated with secondhand apparel shopping; however, research has shown that factors like perceived norms, ethical benefits, and economic benefits all have the potential to impact consumers' willingness to purchase secondhand apparel for themselves and to recommend secondhand apparel to others (Lo et al., 2019). Understanding this shift in consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors related to secondhand apparel is critical in gaining a well-rounded understanding of consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors in different sustainable fashion contexts.

## CHAPTER 3: STUDY PART I

### 3.1 Purpose Statement and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the various consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Sustainability is typically defined as having three core pillars – social, environmental, and economic – with each encompassing various sustainable business practices. This study used these pillars as a framework for understanding the different types of sustainable fashion businesses and their appeal to consumers, enabling a deeper understanding of consumers' motivators and how fashion businesses with various sustainable attributes can effectively reach their target market.

Part I of this study aimed to establish an understanding of how young adult consumers define the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses, as well as the ways that these attributes shape young consumers' attitudes and behaviors in sustainable fashion consumption. As such, the following research objectives were developed to frame Part I of the study:

**RO1:** To define the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that are important to young adult consumers in their alternative evaluation and purchase decision-making processes

**RO2:** To understand the impact of sustainable business practices on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors

**RO3:** To understand the role of status and/or green signaling in consumers' purchase behavior related to sustainable fashion goods

### 3.2 Study Methodology: Part I

#### 3.2.1 Method Overview

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, the first part of which involved qualitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher is involved directly with data collection through content analysis, participant observation, focus group moderation, and interviewing. Qualitative research participants are purposefully selected based on their association with the research topic(s) being studied and the expertise or direct experience they may have that will inform their answers to focus group or interview questions. For the purpose of this study, a focus group interview methodology was employed; the primary researcher developed a series of open-ended questions to provide structure to an hour-long group interview of 3-5 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The focus group atmosphere allows for relatively free and easy discussion amongst participants, with the intention that group members will build on each others' responses as they share their own experiences (Kotler & Armstrong, 2020).

Once these interviews were completed and participants' responses had been recorded, the researcher analyzed the interview transcripts for meaningful, relevant themes and data points. Per Spiggle (1994), the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data obtained from these focus group interviews involved categorization of the data through coding, abstraction and comparison of data to identify meaningful patterns, dimensionalization, or determining key properties of previously identified categories and constructs, and potentially the integration of categories and constructs through axial or selective coding. Since this study uses a mixed-methods approach, findings from Part I informed the development of the research instrument, questions, and hypotheses for Part II. Hypotheses are not typically developed prior to focus group interviews; however, it is natural for a researcher to have their own hypotheses and/or assumptions that may inform the questions they ask in a focus group setting or the answers they expect to hear from

focus group participants. To prevent any inherent biases of the primary researcher from influencing the study, moderator guides and data analysis results were independently reviewed by additional members of the research team to ensure objectivity.

### **3.2.2 Research Plan**

The purpose of Part I of this study was to identify common motives, expectations, and attitudes held by sustainable fashion consumers, as well as the role that status signaling plays in their purchase behavior and the attributes they are drawn to when shopping for sustainable fashion goods. To explore this topic, we conducted two focus groups, each composed of 3-4 participants who had made a sustainable fashion purchase within the last year. Participants in each focus group provided a diverse sample of the population this research aimed to evaluate, with seven total participants ranging in age from 19-21. Due to the demographic makeup of the typical consumer population being recruited, the possibility was acknowledged early on that many of the focus group participants may identify as women. This is a limitation worth noting, but it will not likely impact the final scope of the study since the research conducted during Part II involved a larger, more diverse sample population. Once the focus groups were conducted, a qualitative content analysis was completed to find common themes and establish the basis for Part II of the study.

### **3.2.3 Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to provide direction for Part I of the study:

**RQ1:** What are the consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses?

**RQ2:** What influence do these attributes have on consumers' attitudes towards sustainable fashion businesses?

**RQ3:** How do these attributes impact consumers' purchase decision-making behavior for sustainable fashion goods?

**RQ4:** Do different sustainable product attributes carry different levels of 'status' in the minds of consumers? What influence, if any, does this status have on their willingness to purchase these products?

These questions served as a foundation for the development of the focus group moderator guide and were used as a reference point during data analysis.

### **3.3 Focus Group Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

For Part I of this study, data were collected through two focus group sessions. Twelve potential participants responded to the initial recruitment outreach, and a total of seven participants across two groups comprised the final sample. Each group had 3-4 participants and lasted approximately one hour. Prior to the focus groups, a moderator guide was developed to include conversation-guiding questions about participants' buying motives for sustainable fashion, their beliefs and attitudes toward sustainable fashion consumption, the characteristics and attributes that consumers value in sustainable fashion goods, and the expectations they have when buying these products (See Appendix A). Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling in partnership with local sustainable fashion businesses and leaders for sustainability-focused organizations and events at a university in the southeastern United States. The moderator guide was pilot tested with a group of peers to ensure succinctness and effectiveness.

Interactions during the focus groups were recorded – with participant permission – and transcribed to aid in content analysis. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes using the methodology outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018), wherein transcript data is collected, pared

down, and analyzed manually or using computer software. The aim of this process is to generate a description of the data as well as major themes that emerge during analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These themes were used to finalize hypotheses and determine key variables for Part II of the study.

### 3.4 Participants

Study participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, with the intention of recruiting a sample that had some level of knowledge and/or experience with sustainable fashion. Potential participants were asked to fill out an interest form detailing their contact information and whether they had made a sustainable fashion purchase within the last year. Interest form respondents were then contacted by the researcher to begin scheduling focus group interviews, and the retention rate of respondents from the initial form to the scheduling form was 75%. Details about the seven participants in the final sample population for Part I are included below in Table 3.1. To preserve anonymity and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used in place of participants' actual names.

**Table 3.1.** Pseudonym and Demographic Description of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race and Ethnicity	Age
Carmen	Female	White (Hispanic or Latino)	20
Jordan	Female	Black or African American	19
Finley	Female	Middle Eastern	20
Bella	Female	White (Not Hispanic or Latino)	19
Kaia	Female	American Indian or Alaska Native	19
Riley	Male	White (Not Hispanic or Latino)	21
Josh	Male	White (Not Hispanic or Latino)	21

It is worth noting that all of the participants in this study had some level of exposure to sustainability prior to this study, either through their familial upbringing, their education in high school or college, or a combination of the two. Obtaining a sample with experience or expertise

related to sustainable fashion was crucial for Part I of this study as we sought to understand how consumers define the attributes of sustainable fashion products and businesses. Participants' foundational knowledge added depth to the conversations that occurred within both focus groups, making it an important factor to acknowledge when analyzing the resulting themes that emerged.

### **3.5 Thematic Analysis**

Using qualitative methodology defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Spiggle (1994), audio and video recordings from each of the focus group interviews were manually transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify meaningful patterns. Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four key themes: (1) People, Planet, and Profit, (2) Managing Your Expectations, (3) Specificity is Key, and (4) Thanks, I Thrifted It! People, Planet, and Profit encompasses the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that participants identified as their top priorities. Managing Your Expectations relates to shifts in the consumer mindset and attitude that occur when a particular brand does (or does not) possess certain attributes. Specificity is Key addresses the impact of sustainable attributes on consumers' purchase decision-making behavior, including the roles of consumer education and consumer trust. Finally, Thanks, I Thrifted It! provides an exploration of consumers' green signaling behavior related to their sustainable fashion purchases.

#### **3.5.1 People, Planet, and Profit**

The three core pillars of sustainability – environmental, social, and economic – serve as the foundational framework of this study, but they are also a common reference point for consumers looking to describe the elements or attributes of sustainability. Also known as the '3 P's' (People, Planet, and Profit), these pillars emerged in both focus group discussions as one of

the first things that came to mind for participants when they thought about sustainability. Additionally, they shaped much of participants' conversation surrounding their definition of the attributes that sustainable fashion businesses should possess. Through the use of a group multivoting exercise, both focus groups identified their collective top 4-6 attributes, those which they felt were most important for a sustainable fashion business to have. Those attributes included transparency, manufacturing and production processes, the end use of a garment, ethical treatment of people, affordability, long-lastingness (durability/quality), charity/donation, and whether a brand was impact-driven. To understand how each of these attributes fits into the overarching People, Planet, and Profit framework, each pillar of sustainability will be discussed in three key sub-themes: (1) Who Made It? (2) How Did They Do It? and (3) How Much Will It Cost Me?

### ***Who Made It? (People)***

For a majority of participants, environmental sustainability attributes were the first on their list of key elements that a sustainable fashion business should possess. With that said, conversation quickly turned to social sustainability in terms of the ethical treatment of garment workers as well as the animals who may serve as source material for apparel. Kaia noted that an important part of sustainability is, "the people who are actually making the clothes, like the sustainability of the workforce," which Josh connected to the sourcing process that occurs in the apparel supply chain, including the sourcing of raw goods and the sourcing of labor. Jordan's perspective on the matter was even more descriptive:

I think also being sustainable with materials and the way that clothes are made, because it starts all the way back into the animals we get our materials from and stuff, and how, over time, animals are bred to have a certain type of fur, a certain type of wool, but they've been bred to where even their wool and their being is so low quality that... once it becomes an article of clothing, it won't even last. On top of that, the animals are treated unethically. The people who make the clothes are treated unethically... So it's hard to be

sustainable when the stuff that is supposed to be the very foundation of the clothes is not even sustainable in itself.

When asked to prioritize these attributes in addition to the other attributes that emerged in conversation, the ethical treatment of people was identified as a top priority by both groups. The first focus group rated the ethical treatment of workers as one of their top six most important attributes (from an original list of thirteen); however, when asked to rank these six attributes in order of most to least important on an individual basis, the participants in focus group one all ranked this attribute as their fifth-most important. While it is clear from both focus groups that the ethical treatment of laborers is important, priorities related to other pillars of sustainability remained a larger focus in these discussions.

### ***How Did They Do It? (Planet)***

One of the overarching questions that both groups explored when defining the key attributes a sustainable fashion business should possess was, “how did they do it?” Participants explored many aspects of the apparel supply chain and its impact on the environment, including different manufacturing and production processes, innovative technologies that help reduce waste, and the role of circularity in today’s fashion market. Participants also expressed a desire for garments to be long-lasting and durable; Finley stated:

For me, the biggest thing is long-lasting because I hate when you buy something and it becomes unusable after 2 or 3 years... sometimes even fabrics just deteriorate, and it’s so frustrating.

Josh agreed, noting that, “if the manufacturing and production, the people who are making it, and the materials are all sourced in the way we’re thinking about, that should be a telltale sign in terms of quality... If you’re creating a garment in the way that it’s supposed to be created, (it) should be a key principle, how long it will last you.” Participants’ emphasis on the quality and durability of construction remained one of their top priorities, and the interconnectedness of

these attributes – particularly in terms of how the manufacturing and production processes impact the final garment – was clearly defined.

Regarding the manufacturing and production processes involved in the creation of sustainable garments, participants noted that important factors included optimizing water usage, energy efficiency, and material use in order to reduce waste, with Riley emphasizing that ‘zero waste’ was an attribute they looked for in a sustainable fashion product. Additionally, the concept of circularity and mindfulness with respect to the end use of a garment was determined to be quite important. Bella stated, “I’m thinking of the end use of (the garment). If it’s biodegradable, if it’s going to contribute to microplastics or something like that.” Riley and Josh agreed that circularity involved having an end-of-life plan for the garment, including whether it can be reused, recycled, or donated. To simplify the identification of top attributes among both focus groups, ‘manufacturing/production’ and ‘end use’ were defined as separate attributes; while both can be considered important parts of the circular economy in terms of the garment life cycle, it was important to separate them in order to determine which attributes were most significant in the minds of consumers.

Arguably the most significant attribute defined by participants in both focus groups was that of transparency. When asked to define what transparency would look like in an ideal world, Carmen stated:

I guess for me it would be being able to, when you research a company, not having to go to lengths to understand it... I feel like sometimes they make it hard, so we don't find it. And also companies owning up to what they're doing right and what they're not doing yet, because you know, it's a new thing, sustainability. It's not that long that it's even (been) a word. So I guess it's companies just being brave, I would say, to own up to what they're not doing yet, and what they have done towards (sustainability).

Jordan described transparency as, “letting everyone know exactly what you’re doing and not sugar coating anything,” while Finley explained that transparency was, “at the very least, not

actively lying.” The concept of transparency seemed to encompass truthfulness and corporate honesty for a lot of participants; Bella noted:

I think the big thing is being truthful. Greenwashing is the big buzz word for people (who are) saying they do one thing and then actually not being truthful about that. So I think with transparency, (it’s) knowing what's happening and the impact of that, but also (the information) being true.

Participants also expressed a desire for some sort of verification system or third-party certification to confirm that the information being shared by companies about sustainability is actually true. Like Carmen, Riley and Kaia noted that it was important for companies to be upfront about their shortcomings. Riley said:

I would even say it goes as far as the honesty of the brand, even if they’re not doing things well, or even if they are working towards something. I think that's what matters too, because a lot of companies can't just right off the bat be super sustainable. But it's just a matter of a company kind of knowing where they're going with their line or their production.

Kaia agreed with Riley, stating, “I think just even starting with acknowledgement from top leaders, which is just talk from them. But some sort of acknowledgement and, I guess, plan of action for the future.” Based on these conversations, it is clear that transparency is a top attribute that consumers are looking for in a sustainable fashion brand; with that said, it is worth noting that young consumers seem to have developed distrust for the information that may be publicly distributed by sustainable brands, highlighting the need for third-party verification on sustainability information and the appeal of honest, forthright communication about errors and plans for improvement among companies who are working to implement sustainable practices.

### ***How Much Will It Cost Me? (Profit)***

Discussions surrounding economic sustainability from a business perspective often center around the profit margin that a company is able to maintain; for this reason, the core pillars of sustainability have also been referred to as the ‘triple bottom line,’ wherein environmental and

social impact factor into a company's final 'margin' alongside financial gain. From the participants' perspective, economic sustainability centered more around attributes like product affordability, charitable contributions, and whether a business is impact-driven. Bella was the first to identify 'economical' as a key attribute of a sustainable fashion business, defining economical as sustainable to buy or sustainable for consumers to pay for; when asked whether 'sustainable to buy' referred to the consumption of secondhand goods or the affordability of goods, she stated, "I think affordability, because (I know) that's what I look for. I think that's one of the biggest issues currently." Other participants expressed similar concerns with the affordability of sustainable goods, noting that offerings from fast fashion brands are often more budget-friendly and that cost may be a deterrent for consumers who would like to shop for sustainable goods, but are on a more limited budget.

In addition to the personal financial impact of shopping sustainably, participants also discussed charitable partnerships, donations, and impact-driven business models as attributes they looked for in sustainable fashion businesses. Both groups identified Patagonia as one of the businesses they associate most with sustainability, and Kaia stated, "one (reason) why I immediately thought of Patagonia was that they donate so much to research and that kind of thing, so charity or donations (are important attributes)." Companies' willingness to contribute to charity and/or pursue a smaller profit margin in hopes of making sustainable fashion more accessible also came up when participants were asked how much more they would be willing to spend on a sustainable fashion good compared to a traditional fashion good. Riley stated:

Even if something is more expensive, that does not mean that it's more sustainable... And also it's like, how much is the business profiting off of it? If the business is trying to make a lot of money (for a cause), or if they're giving to charity, I'd be more willing to spend more money versus like a business who's not willing to do those things. I see that as a way to get more money, just because they're going to promote themselves as sustainable.

From the participants' perspective, supporting sustainable businesses is a way to ensure that their purchase has impact beyond just their wear. Several participants demonstrated a desire to support fashion businesses who were impact-driven and/or working to improve their sustainable business practices, particularly as it pertains to smaller businesses. Josh said:

A lot of my sustainable purchases that aren't thrifting-based go to supporting a company... I feel like a lot of those companies are typically fighting to stay in business because they don't get a consistent number of sales. So especially if I buy something once and I like it, I'm probably gonna try to keep supporting that company as frequently (as it makes sense, both sustainably and economically).

Based on these findings, it is clear that economic sustainability from a consumer perspective extends beyond just the profit margin that a business is able to maintain; in fact, the more important attributes related to economic sustainability appear to center around whether a garment is sold at an accessible price point and/or how a business is utilizing their profits to drive impact and promote positive change.

### **3.5.2 Managing Your Expectations**

In exploring the impact of sustainable fashion attributes on consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion products and businesses, the second key theme emerged: Managing Your Expectations. To evaluate these attitude shifts, participants were asked the following question: "If a product does not possess these attributes that you've identified as top priorities, does that affect your attitude towards the product and/or your attitude towards the business?" Some of the participants responded with a quintessential 'it depends...', while others expressed that a lack of these attributes 'definitely' impacted their attitude towards the brand, though not necessarily towards a specific product. It became clear that one of the driving factors behind whether or not an attitude shift occurred was consumers' expectations of the product and/or brand. Jordan noted:

I think it depends on the product, and it also depends on if the product is marketed as a sustainable product, because if the company is, you know, straight up like, 'oh, we're not trying to be sustainable, like it's whatever,' (sustainable attributes) are not going to be

something I'm looking for, I already know this isn't going to be sustainable. So I'm not looking for any of these (attributes). But if it's something that's marketed as something that's very sustainable, I'm going to want to look for these attributes to kind of (verify), like are you actually sustainable?

Finley agreed, stating:

I would say it depends on who you bought it from and what you expected from the item. For instance, I bought this pair of pants from Forever21 a few years ago and now it's quite literally deteriorating, like the fabric doesn't have a pattern anymore. I should probably throw it out. And I still have pairs of pants from almost 10 years ago that I'm still wearing, and they're still so much more intact than these (Forever21) pair of pants. (So) it would affect it if I expected it to be (sustainable), because it really affected how I look at Forever21, how they make their clothes, and I kind of stopped going there because I was like, 'oh, I'm not going to be able to use it anymore after a little bit.'

Regardless of her expectations, Bella explained that she always looked for affordability and fit in a garment. Beyond those attributes, she explained, "if I'm looking for something sustainable, I would look for (the identified) attributes, but I'm not going to sit here and tell you I look for something sustainable every time I go shopping, because that's not really realistic money-wise," reconnecting with previous conversations about the lack of affordable options available in sustainable fashion.

The group's identified sustainable fashion attributes also served as a way for them to comparatively evaluate garment options. Carmen explained:

Depending on what I'm looking for, sometimes it's hard... like, you need something (and) you just can't find a sustainable option. But it does affect me when I have different options, and one of them is better, it's more transparent, it has better sourcing, (etc.). So I guess it's more competition-wise, maybe.

Similarly, Riley explained that he often prefers thrifting over more traditional shopping because he doesn't have to make sure that his entire 'checklist' of attributes is checked off by a particular product or brand. In this way, easing the mental load of shopping sustainably becomes achievable; as Josh noted later in the focus group interview:

I feel like people get so overwhelmed because (sustainability) is presented as this huge thing, because it is. But you have to boil it down to these smaller, important aspects for it to actually captivate people.

When consumers have a set of attributes that they are looking for in a particular garment, they are more easily able to evaluate alternatives and ultimately make a satisfactory purchase decision. Understandably, brands who do not meet their expectations in terms of these attributes are met with a less favorable attitude than brands who meet (or exceed) their expectations. Kaia explained that this attitude shift is, “definitely more of an attitude towards the brand, because if you have, like a sustainable line of something, or (an) allegedly sustainable line. But then everything else (you offer) is just like, not that, it’s a lot more on the brand.” Sustainable product lines came up several times in conversation, with participants expressing their disdain for fast fashion companies who offer a ‘sustainably-supported’ line among other products that are detrimental to the environment. Josh stated:

I would say if I don't have key indicators that a company is making an effort to be a beneficial contribution to society as best they can while still producing raw products, then I'm not likely to buy from them once or, you know, again, if (I already have) once.

Overall, these findings make it clear that consumers hold specific expectations in terms of a sustainable fashion business’ attributes, and that if these expectations are not met, their attitude towards the brand will be negatively affected. With that said, participants appeared to have an equally negative perception of brands who were only utilizing sustainable practices for a portion of their products; this shift in attitude and its impact on consumers’ buying behavior is explored in the third theme, Specificity is Key.

### **3.5.3 Specificity is Key**

To better understand the relationship between the previously-defined sustainable fashion attributes and participants’ own sustainable fashion consumption behavior, participants were asked whether they were more likely to buy a product that was advertised as sustainable.

Surprisingly, the answer was almost immediately ‘no.’ Kaia explained that companies advertising products as sustainable made her suspicious, and Riley agreed, stating:

(Sustainability) is more just a buzz word to me. It's just something I see. I'm like, ‘okay, but what else? What are you saying beyond that? I was in Aeropostale the other day and they have post-consumer recycled, I guess, pants or something, like some material, (and) they pretty much labeled (the garment) as sustainable. But then, obviously, I’m sitting in a store currently surrounded by garments that were probably produced in a sweatshop.

Josh explained that specificity was key when marketing a product as sustainable, largely due to the fact that when consumers are familiarized with the concept of marketing, it changes their perspective and their expectations. He said:

How specific is a brand being when they say sustainable? What information are we given? What are we not given? I feel like a big part of my ‘sustainable evolution’ even just this year was from living in another country (when I studied abroad) and seeing how things are marketed differently. When you know a brand is made on site, like they're literally sewing it in the back room, and the materials are from the weaver that's 10 miles outside of the city, and it's all grown right there, and (then) it's not marketed as sustainable, it's just marketed as a product, it starts to tell you a lot about companies who do have to go out of their way to market things as sustainable to try to fit a niche, because realistically, I feel like Aeropostale or someone marketing something as sustainable is just trying to hit another market niche of buyers rather than actually having (the products) be sustainable for the sake of being sustainable.

When asked where they go to look for information on the sustainable attributes of a garment, participants reported utilizing company websites and garment tags. Bella explained that there would likely be more aspects she would pay attention to if the information were easier to access, but she noted that a lot of that information is not advertised for sustainably made or non-sustainably made clothing. Participants’ educational background and marketing experience also played a role in how they approached their search for information. Kaia noted:

We have the knowledge of, ‘this is the marketing, this is how you market fashion.’ So it's another layer of, ‘okay, now that I know this, I'm not gonna be fooled as easily.’

Specific attributes related to sustainability, including phrases like ‘zero waste’ and ‘ethically made,’ meant more to participants than simply marketing a product as ‘sustainable.’

Understanding that greenwashing occurs often in marketing, young adult consumers are expressing a clear desire for specific, easily-accessible information related to the sustainable attributes of a garment; this specificity in marketing emerged in focus group discussions as an important factor in the purchase decision-making process of participants.

Much of the participants' sustainable fashion consumption behavior was specific to thrifting, with a majority of participants noting that they had been thrifting within the past few weeks. Even when thrifting, participants noted that they still sought out key sustainable fashion attributes in their selections, including the materials and the end use / end-of-life care of the garment. Additionally, participants were intentional about making selections for longevity; Kaia explained that with her last sustainable fashion purchase – a thrifted sweatshirt – she made her selection not only because she liked the look of the garment, but because it was multifunctional and she would be able to get a lot of use out of it. Participants also expressed a desire for sustainable garments that were not considered 'trendy.' Finley explained:

If something looks like it's going to go out of fashion soon, that would be something I wouldn't purchase either. If it's something that I can be like, 'okay, this is gonna be a staple piece I can wear for years and years,' I would be fine spending money on that.

Jordan agreed, stating:

I would definitely invest in some basics, like a really good pair of black jeans that just go with everything, I'm going to buy those jeans. But if I'm like 'oh, this is kind of trendy,' even though it's sustainable, (I think) maybe I should hold back because I know I'm not going to wear it because it's going to be out of style.

Due to budget constraints, many college students and young adults are making a considerable financial investment when purchasing goods from a sustainable brand. For this reason, it makes sense that many of these participants gravitate towards thrifting apparel and work to ensure that, if they are buying from a sustainable brand, they are able to verify information about the brand's sustainability claims.

### 3.5.4 Thanks, I Thrifted It!

The final topic of conversation explored through the focus group interviews was intended to determine whether products with sustainable fashion attributes carry ‘status’ in the minds of consumers, and how the desire for status or green signaling impacts their purchase decision-making behavior related to sustainable fashion goods. Generally, all participants reported a high likelihood that they would tell others about the sustainable attributes of garments they had purchased; participants’ level of likelihood ranged from a 7-9 out of 10, where 1 is ‘I never tell anyone’ and 10 is ‘it’s the first thing I share about a garment.’ Their reasoning for sharing these attributes with others varied, with participants noting the importance of advocating for sustainability and expressing a desire to influence others to shop more sustainably. Josh stated:

If (sustainability) is the reason why I bought the item, it's probably going to be the first thing that I tell people about it.

Riley rated his sharing behavior at a 9 out of 10, saying:

I think advocacy is a really big thing, I think that’s also the first step toward a lot of change, so like personally if I can advocate what I do and I can influence other people I think that goes into this (idea of) collective impact thinking. So if I can change something and it can influence someone else, then we can have other people change as well.

Participants also noted feelings of pride, excitement, and accomplishment when purchasing sustainable goods and sharing those purchases with others. Bella explained:

I literally wore a dress last week, and I don't normally dress up so it's like a big shock to everyone, they’re like ‘oh my God I love your dress,’ and I’m like ‘thanks, I thrifted it!’ and I altered it. It’s like an automatic response. It’s just something I’m proud to say, ‘I thrifted it.’

While participants’ overall feelings about sharing the sustainable attributes of their purchases were positive, several participants identified the difficulty of sharing thrifted finds with others due to the inherent one-of-a-kind nature of thrifted goods. Kaia explained that while she still shares that she thrifted a particular good, it is more difficult because she is only able to

refer others to a particular thrift store where they might have similar luck instead of being able to share the link to an exact garment. Riley explained that he uses situations like these as educational opportunities:

I know in instances where I have things that I've thrifted on, I usually get into conversations with people about thrifting, or if they're interested I'll give them recommendations or offer them ways that they could also start to be better consumers... If you find something that someone else doesn't find, the automatic (response) is sharing resources, and that's a lot more beneficial than just not saying anything at all.

The sense of pride and accomplishment that participants experienced when shopping for sustainable goods was also expressed in terms of thrifted goods, particularly when the 'hunt' for an item was more challenging. The idea that 'I got a good one' or 'I worked hard to find this' provided satisfaction for the participants, especially when they were able to share that find with others.

Interestingly, some participants reported that the feelings of shame surrounding fast fashion consumption were more heightened than any positive feelings associated with shopping for sustainable clothing. Finley stated:

Something I've noticed is that over the summer I had to buy two or three pieces from SHEIN because I really needed a specific piece really fast... Even if I don't necessarily feel anything when I'm thrifting, I've noticed the sense of shame when shopping from SHEIN is greater than the sense of joy (when thrifting). When people complimented me on it, I'd be like 'oh, I don't remember (where it's from).'

Kaia expressed similar disdain for SHEIN and other fast fashion brands, noting that shopping from SHEIN was 'not an option' for her and noting that, while that did limit her options, it also likely kept her from mindlessly shopping for garments she didn't need. Reduced apparel consumption in general was mentioned several times throughout the focus group interviews, and it became clear from conversations surrounding thrifting behavior and how participants spoke about their own habits that they were being intentionally mindful about their consumption. Josh said:

I made an effort to not have an emotional reaction to it, because I wanted to try to make it as normal of a thing for me as possible. Like if I'm buying something, it's going to be sustainable, and that's not something to feel good about, it's just the right thing to do, it's just how I want to do it. I felt like if I could remove the emotional part of it, then I wouldn't be thinking about, 'okay, this costs this much more,' it's just like I either do this or I don't get anything at all.

Understanding how young adult consumers approach their consumption decisions is an important part of gaining a holistic view of their decision-making process related to sustainable fashion. For Generation Z consumers, being intentional about their choices and advocating for the most sustainable options among their peers are powerful ways to increase the impact of their buying decisions.

When asked whether purchasing and wearing sustainable fashion goods gave them an elevated sense of status, participants' opinions were split. One group said that wearing sustainable fashion goods 'definitely' gave them an elevated sense of status, noting that it makes them feel good when people notice the garments they are wearing and they're able to share that they thrifted it or bought it sustainably. Josh stated:

The amount of dopamine I get when someone comes up to me and they're like, 'I like that!' and I'm like, 'thanks, it's one of one.' I would say I don't feel good about it when I buy it, but when someone else appreciates it, I kind of get (a) rush. It is kind of like you're doing it because you know other people aren't, in a way, where it's like you want to be that person who's making a difference. So when you get noticed for that, I feel like it kind of does bring in the sense of like, okay, I'm doing something that other people aren't, and that makes me feel good.

Kaia agreed and elaborated on her own feelings, sharing:

I think it's also like I put in the time and the effort to actually find this, whereas, not to degrade other people, but if you just go on a fast fashion website, it's like the same thing in 17 colors. And then (when) you just like get that, and then the person next to you has it, it's like, Okay, well, I found this in the bins at Goodwill!

Another group of participants explained that while shopping for sustainable goods boosted their own self-confidence, they did not feel like it elevated their status above other consumers. Jordan explained:

Generally, I feel like for me, when I wear something sustainable and someone else doesn't, I'm not necessarily like, 'oh, I'm better than this person.' In this specific area, I put in more work than this person might have in this area, but that doesn't mean anything bad about them, because maybe they have put in the work somewhere else, and are more sustainable somewhere else that's not fashion. So it's just more like, 'oh, in this specific instance, with this article of clothing that we both happen to own, I got the sustainable one, or even I could afford the sustainable one, and like maybe they couldn't, or it fit me better...' I'm just kind of like, yeah, I got it and you didn't, but like that doesn't mean I'm better, it just means I got a good one.

Carmen agreed with that sentiment, explaining that it was less about her feeling 'better than someone' and more about the satisfaction of saying 'yeah, I did good.'

Beyond their feelings of an elevated sense of status, participants also expressed increased feelings of self-confidence, social acceptance, and uniqueness gained by shopping for apparel with sustainable attributes. Finley stated:

For me, I don't know if it's necessarily the act of buying something sustainable or buying something unique, because like when you go thrifting, you find a lot of really unique things... to be honest, I think maybe it is just finding something unique for so cheap. So yeah, it's not necessarily (feeling) better than other people, but just feeling more confident, basically, because of a unique piece. Like, you know your outfit stands out.

Josh noted that how a person dresses can often serve as an expression of themselves, sharing that when someone takes notice of that expression and makes a point to say something about it, it's a form of feeling accepted for him. Kaia also shared that she felt shopping sustainably had helped her develop a sense of style that makes her feel good, and Riley agreed that thrifting had helped him to expand his style. He shared:

At first (thrifting) was more about like, 'oh, I can buy one of a kind things, or I can buy things that most people won't have.' I think slowly that kind of transitioned, at least for me, into a more sustainable mindset, like the things that I am wearing are more sustainable and the way that I go about my purchases is more sustainable. So I think, at first, it was more of, 'oh, I can be more unique,' but now it's more of, 'well, I think I can continue this, or I should continue this, it's more sustainable and it aligns more with my values.' Personally, I just really like to express myself through clothing, but then I also like to be more sustainable, so I think that's why I do seek out thrifting, and I do try to seek out brands that are trying to do new things.

It became clear through these conversations that the participants had gained a lot on a personal level from their journeys to shop more sustainably, whether that was a stronger sense of self, a boost in confidence, or an increased awareness of the impact of their consumption and, with that, a desire to advocate for those around them to make more sustainable choices. Understanding how young consumers' desire for self and social acceptance shapes their sustainable fashion consumption behavior is an unexpected, but valuable finding from Part I of this study, one that will be explored in addition to the initially outlined research objectives for this study. Further exploration of the concepts discussed throughout the thematic analysis was conducted through the use of quantitative research methods in Part II of this study, which is outlined in Chapter 4.

### **3.6 Key Assumptions and Limitations**

#### **3.6.1 Study Assumptions**

Due to the nature of this mixed-methods study, there were several noteworthy assumptions made that should be taken into consideration. As the first portion of this study involved qualitative data analysis on information obtained from focus groups (or semi-structured interviews), it is assumed that respondents were honest and forthright about their shopping experiences, motives, and perspectives in general. In keeping with typical assumptions made about qualitative work, it is also assumed that researchers objectively analyzed the information shared in these focus groups and conducted their content analysis and theme derivation in an unbiased manner.

#### **3.6.2 Study Limitations**

As with all research, there are several distinct limitations of this study that should be noted. First, one limitation of this study - particularly as it pertains to Part I - is that participation is limited to a specific subset of the total population being studied; in the case of these focus

groups, participants were recruited in the southeastern United States. Their responses were generalized in the creation of the research instrument for Part II, which potentially limits overall study generalizability. Additional limitations of qualitative research include maintaining objectivity in guiding focus groups and when analyzing data for key themes.

## CHAPTER 4: STUDY PART II

### 4.1 Purpose Statement and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the various consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Additionally, this study sought to understand how motivational drivers and barriers influence consumers' desire to purchase sustainable fashion goods and to share about those purchases with their peers. After defining the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that are important to young adult consumers in their decision-making processes in Part I, Part II of this study was framed by the following research objectives:

**RO2:** To understand the impact of sustainable business practices on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors

**RO3:** To understand the role of green signaling in consumers' purchase and sharing intention related to sustainable fashion goods

**RO4:** To evaluate the impact of various motivational drivers and barriers on consumers' purchase and sharing intention related to sustainable fashion goods

These motivational drivers and barriers, including consumers' desire for uniqueness, propensity for green signaling, trust of sustainable fashion brands, and willingness to pay for sustainable goods, were established in Part I of this study and through a review of extant literature.

### 4.2 Hypothesis Development

Hypotheses for this study were developed based on the theoretical framework for this study, the study's objectives, and findings from Part I. Relevant literature for each of the

variables used in the model for Part II of this study is discussed alongside the hypotheses being tested.

#### **4.2.1 Behavioral Intentions**

Young adults' consumption of sustainable apparel served as the focus of Part I of this study, and extant literature pertaining to young adult sustainable fashion consumption behaviors was outlined in Chapter 2. Young adult consumers' behavioral intentions were the primary focus of the quantitative portion of this study, with purchase intention, in-person sharing intention (word-of-mouth), and online sharing intention (electronic word-of-mouth) serving as dependent variables in the theoretical model being tested. This is due to a number of factors, including the measurability of intention versus behavior in quantitative research; since actual purchase behavior cannot be verified in anonymized survey data, behavioral intentions are more reasonable dependent variables to explore.

Intention is defined as, "a person's location on a subjective probability dimension involving a relation between [themselves] and some action" (Fishbein and Azjen, 1975, p. 288). Westaby's (2005) behavioral reasoning theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for Part II of this study, suggests that the effect of cognitive, affective, and contextual variables is "funneled through intentions, which directly drive behavior" (p. 99). As discussed in Chapter 2, previous studies have observed that young adult consumers' environmental consciousness and pro-environmental attitudes influence their intent to purchase sustainable fashion goods (Penz and Drewes, 2022; Lin & Chen, 2022). Additionally, the perceived value of sustainable apparel goods, including rented apparel, secondhand apparel, and recycled apparel, has been established as a factor which significantly affects sustainable apparel purchase intention (Lin & Chen, 2022). Studies have also demonstrated that factors such as consumers' trust of sustainable apparel

brands and the cost of sustainable goods can impact purchase intention (Tong & Su, 2018; Diddi et al., 2019; Kreuzer et al., 2019). Based on findings from current literature and observations from Part I, purchase intention was deemed an important and relevant dependent variable for Part II of this study.

Tymoshchuk, Lou, and Ting (2024) found that the perceived hedonic value, perceived utilitarian value, and perceived environmental value of secondhand apparel positively influenced consumers' purchase intention and word-of-mouth (sharing) intention, stating, "consumers are willing to purchase and recommend second-hand clothing when they find joy and excitement from it or when they enjoy practical benefits such as cost-effectiveness" (p. 13). Salem and Alanadoly (2021) found a statistically significant positive relationship between consumers' awareness of sustainable products and their use of word-of-mouth (WOM) to spread information about those products with their peers. The sample of this study was composed primarily of young adults (age 18-30), and the authors noted that, "consumers who have a higher concern about environmental behavior tend to share their opinions and encourage their peers to be more environmentally friendly" (Salem & Alanadoly, 2021, p. 36). Similarly, Kautish & Khare (2022) found that consumers' green apparel knowledge significantly influenced their perception of sustainable apparel, which had a positive impact on consumers' sustainable apparel purchase intention and their intent to share about these experiences with other consumers (eWOM). These findings align with the perspectives shared by participants in Part I, who expressed feelings of pride about their sustainable apparel purchases and noted that they were excited to share about sustainable apparel purchases – and sustainable consumption practices in general – with their peers. For these reasons, consumers' intent to share about sustainable apparel purchases and

brands with their peers both online (eWOM) and in-person (WOM) were established as dependent variables of interest for Part II of this study.

#### **4.2.2 Motivational Drivers**

One of the primary research objectives of this study was to understand the role of green signaling in consumers' purchase and sharing intention related to sustainable fashion goods. In Part I of this study, focus group participants noted a tendency to purchase sustainable fashion goods for the sake of sharing about those goods with others, a practice known in the literature as 'green signaling.' As established in Chapter 2, green signaling theory is an expansion of status consumption and signaling theories, and it posits that consumers are more willing to purchase sustainable goods if those goods can be clearly recognized as sustainable (Berger, 2019). In their study on green signaling effects among Generation Z and Millennial consumers, Huh and Kim (2024) confirmed the green signaling effects of organic apparel, noting that younger consumers prefer subtle status signaling via apparel consumption and appreciate the prosocial value of organic apparel. These findings align with those of Awuni and Du (2016), who observed that social values and desire for status motivated young adults' consumption of sustainable goods.

Participants in Part I of this study had mixed opinions on whether shopping sustainably gave them an elevated sense of status in comparison to non-sustainable apparel shoppers, but their consumption of sustainable apparel was clearly motivated by a desire to share about the sustainable attributes of their purchases with others. Several participants discussed the importance of advocating for sustainable shopping practices among peers and online, and many shared stories about their experiences buying from sustainable apparel brands and then sharing about those purchases with their peers. These findings provide further support for the hypothesis

that Generation Z consumers' desire for green signaling influences their purchase and sharing intentions, both online and in-person.

Another key motivational driver observed in Part I of this study was consumers' desire for uniqueness. Snyder and Fromkin (1977) developed the theory of uniqueness, which, "rests on the assumption that although people do at times conform, they do *not* value high degrees of similarity relative to others" (p. 519). Consumers often use apparel consumption as an opportunity to define and enhance their sense of identity and personal style (McCoy, Wang, and Chi, 2021). In Part I of this study, consumers expressed feelings of pride and accomplishment about their sustainable apparel purchases, particularly when shopping for thrifted goods, and they shared about how their sustainable consumption journeys had helped them to develop a sense of individuality and personal style. Additionally, they discussed observations about fast fashion consumption in comparison to secondhand and sustainable apparel consumption, with participants noting that the goods available on fast fashion websites were, "the same thing in seventeen different colors," juxtaposed with the one-of-a-kind garments obtained while thrift shopping.

Childs and Jin (2016) observed that consumers who exhibited a high desire for unique consumer products had higher product evaluations for scarce products, e.g. those marketed as 'available for a limited time only,' and Zebal and Jackson (2019) established product uniqueness as a driver of local apparel consumption. Many secondhand and thrifted goods can be considered scarce, as they are often one-of-one and require a 'hunt' to acquire, and 'shopping locally' is a term frequently used to describe the consumption of more sustainable apparel (as compared to larger national brands or fast fashion brands). McCoy et al. (2021) established Generation Z consumers' need for uniqueness as a motivational driver for collaborative consumption, a form

of sustainable apparel consumption that focuses on clothing rental or sharing; these findings align with those of Lang and Joyner Armstrong (2018), who affirmed the positive influence of consumers' need for uniqueness on their clothing swapping behaviors. While the need for uniqueness is well-established in the literature as a motivational driver for apparel purchase intention in sustainable and non-sustainable contexts, few studies were found that explored consumers' desire for uniqueness in relation to consumers' intention to share about sustainable apparel purchases either online (eWOM) or in-person (WOM).

The following general and null hypotheses were developed to address the impact of these motivational drivers on consumers' purchase and sharing intentions;  $X_i$  and  $Y_i$  are defined in Table 4.1.

$H_{A,i}$ : Motivational driver  $X_i$  has a direct effect on consumers' sustainable apparel  $Y_i$

$H_{0,i}$ : Motivational driver  $X_i$  has no direct effect on consumers' sustainable apparel  $Y_i$

**Table 4.1.** Summary Table of Hypotheses for Consumers' Motivational Drivers

<b>i</b>	<b><math>X_i</math></b>	<b><math>Y_i</math></b>
1a	Green Signaling Behavior	Purchase Intention
1b	Green Signaling Behavior	Sharing Intention (WOM)
1c	Green Signaling Behavior	Sharing Intention (eWOM)
2a	Desire for Uniqueness	Purchase Intention
2b	Desire for Uniqueness	Sharing Intention (WOM)
2c	Desire for Uniqueness	Sharing Intention (eWOM)

It is worth noting that social acceptance was also identified through Part I of the study as a potential motivational driver of consumers' sustainable fashion purchase and sharing intention, and a scale was included in the survey to measure social acceptance; however, this scale did not

meet the required threshold for convergent validity, so social acceptance was eliminated from the final PLS-SEM model and hypotheses related to social acceptance as a driver were not tested.

### **4.2.3 Motivational Barriers**

As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the most significant motivational barriers affecting young adult consumers' intent to purchase sustainable fashion goods is the high cost typically associated with those goods (Diddi et al., 2019; Kreuzer et al., 2019). Willingness to pay has been well-established in the literature as a key factor influencing young adult consumers' sustainable apparel purchase intention (Kumar, Prakash, and Kumar, 2021; Tong and Su, 2018; Chi, Gerard, Yu, and Wang, 2021). With that said, the affordability of sustainable apparel remained top-of-mind for participants in Part I of this study; as such, willingness to pay was established as a relevant motivational barrier to explore in Part II of this study, specifically in terms of its effect on Generation Z consumers' intent to purchase sustainable apparel.

Another noteworthy motivational barrier that can impact consumers' behavioral intentions related to sustainable apparel is consumers' trust of sustainable brands. Tong and Su (2018) found that a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) reputation had a significant positive effect on consumer trust among young adult consumers in the United States, which in turn influences their intention to purchase sustainable goods. Kang and Hustvedt (2014) found that brand trust had a significant effect on consumers' sustainable footwear purchase and word-of-mouth (sharing intentions). Additionally, previous studies have affirmed the effect of consumers' trust of sustainable brands on their purchase intentions and word-of-mouth (sharing) intentions related to green products in general (Román-Augusto, Garrido-Lecca-Vera, Lodeiros-Zubiria, and Mauricio-Andia, 2022; Lam, Lau, and Cheung, 2016; Chen and Chang, 2012). Brand trust was also found to significantly affect brand loyalty, purchase intention, and word-of-

mouth intention with respect to apparel products from brands who share traceable product information (Huynh, Wojdyla, Van Dyk, Yang, and Chi, 2024). Anecdotally, consumer trust was observed to have an impact on consumers' purchase intention among focus group participants in Part I; based on these findings, consumers' trust of brands was established as an important motivational barrier to use in the theoretical model for Part II.

The following general and null hypotheses were developed to address the impact of these motivational barriers on consumers' purchase and sharing intentions;  $X_i$  and  $Y_i$  are defined in Table 4.2.

$H_{A,i}$ : Motivational barrier  $X_i$  has a direct effect on consumers' sustainable apparel  $Y_i$

$H_{0,i}$ : Motivational barrier  $X_i$  has no direct effect on consumers' sustainable apparel  $Y_i$

**Table 4.2.** Summary Table of Hypotheses for Consumers' Motivational Barriers

<b>i</b>	<b><math>X_i</math></b>	<b><math>Y_i</math></b>
3	Willingness to Pay a Premium	Purchase Intention
4a	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Purchase Intention
4b	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Sharing Intention (WOM)
4c	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Sharing Intention (eWOM)

#### 4.2.4 Global Motive: Consumer Attitudes

Results from Part I demonstrated that consumers' attitudes about sustainable fashion brands were largely shaped by their trust of sustainable apparel brands and the marketing tactics used to promote sustainable apparel. Policarpo, Apaolaza, Hartmann, Paredes, and D'Souza (2023) established that a negative relationship exists between consumers' trust in apparel

products marketed as sustainable and social cynicism, or skepticism regarding the values and motives of an entity. This effect was mediated by consumers' perception of greenwashing, demonstrating that, "the influence of cynicism on trust can be explained by an increase in the perception that the firm is using misleading sustainability claims" (Policarpo et al., 2023, p. 1956). These findings align with those from Part I of this study, as participants noted a mistrust of products marketed as 'sustainable' due to the prevalence of greenwashing in the apparel industry; this mistrust led to negative attitudes toward apparel brands who did not possess certain specific, measurable sustainability attributes.

Previous literature has explored the influence of factors like brand trust, garment price, and longevity on young adult consumers' attitudes and sustainable fashion behaviors (McLaren and Goworek, 2017). It has been well-established in the literature that consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands impacts their intent to purchase sustainable goods and their sharing intentions (both online and in-person) regarding sustainable apparel purchases. With that said, findings from Part I indicate that the relationship between consumer trust and behavioral intentions may be more complex. Previous literature that focused specifically on the effect of American Generation Z consumers' trust of sustainable brands on their sustainable apparel consumption attitudes was limited, so exploration of the direct effect of consumer trust on attitudes toward sustainable apparel consumption was deemed important for Part II of this study. The following general and null hypotheses were developed to address the impact of consumer trust of sustainable fashion brands, a motivational barrier, on consumers' attitudes towards sustainable apparel consumption:

**H5<sub>A</sub>:** Consumer trust of sustainable apparel brands has a direct effect on consumer attitudes toward sustainable apparel consumption

**H5<sub>0</sub>:** Consumer trust of sustainable apparel brands has no direct effect on consumer attitudes toward sustainable apparel consumption

In keeping with the theoretical framework established by Westaby (2005), the global motive of consumer attitude was also explored in relation to consumers' purchase and sharing intentions. Previous literature has established a significant relationship between consumers' attitude towards sustainable apparel consumption and their sustainable apparel purchase intention. Nguyen, Nguyen, and Nguyen (2019) found that young Vietnamese consumers' attitudes toward sustainable apparel consumption were positively related to their green apparel purchase intention. Jin, Omar, and Fu (2024) found that Chinese consumers' attitude towards recycled apparel consumption had a statistically significant positive effect on their purchase intention; the sample population of this study was composed largely of young adults (60% of participants aged 18-35), though only 20% of their total participants would be classified as Generation Z consumers in the United States. Yadav and Pathak (2016) also observed that young adult consumers' sustainable product purchase intention could be predicted by their attitudes toward green product consumption. A noteworthy attitude-behavior gap has previously been identified among young adult consumers, particularly Millennials, contrasting their positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion initiatives with their consumption of fast fashion apparel (Cesarina Mason et al., 2022; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Few studies were found that focused specifically on the effect of Generation Z consumers' attitudes toward sustainable consumption on their behavioral intentions related to sustainable fashion goods; as such, the following general and null hypotheses were established;  $Y_i$  is defined in Table 4.3.

**H6<sub>A,i</sub>:** Consumer attitude towards sustainable apparel consumption has a direct effect on sustainable apparel  $Y_i$

**H6<sub>0</sub>:** Consumer attitude towards sustainable apparel consumption has no direct effect on sustainable apparel  $Y_i$

**Table 4.3.** Summary Table of Hypotheses for Global Motive: Consumer Attitudes

<b>i</b>	<b>X<sub>i</sub></b>	<b>Y<sub>i</sub></b>
5	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Consumer Attitude
6a	Consumer Attitude	Purchase Intention
6b	Consumer Attitude	Sharing Intention (WOM)
6c	Consumer Attitude	Sharing Intention (eWOM)

Conversations in Part I of this study revealed that for many participants, attitudes about sustainable apparel consumption were shaped by their trust of sustainable apparel brands (or lack thereof); this attitude shaped their willingness to purchase sustainable apparel and the conversations they had about sustainable fashion consumption with their peers. In addition to exploring the direct effects of consumer brand trust on consumer attitudes and attitudes on purchase and sharing intentions, Part II of this study also seeks to determine the mechanism by which consumer trust affects purchase and sharing intentions. For this reason, Part II explored the impact of consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands on their attitudes toward those brands and, with attitude as a mediator, their purchasing and sharing intentions regarding sustainable apparel. Dhir, Sadiq, Talwar, Sakashita, and Kaur (2021) found that the relationship between consumers' trust of green apparel products and their green apparel buying behavior was mediated by environmental attitudes. Mosunmola, Omotayo, and Mayowa (2018) also observed that consumer trust had a significant positive effect on both attitude and apparel purchase

intention in an online environment, though this study was not specific to sustainable apparel consumption. Few studies were found that explored the role of attitude as a mediator in the effect of Generation Z consumers' trust of sustainable brands on their sustainable apparel purchase intention or their sharing intentions, either in-person (WOM) or online (eWOM). As such, the following general and null hypotheses were established;  $Y_i$  is defined in Table 4.4.

**H7<sub>A,i</sub>:** The influence of consumers' trust of sustainable brands on consumers' sustainable apparel  $Y_i$  is mediated by consumer attitude

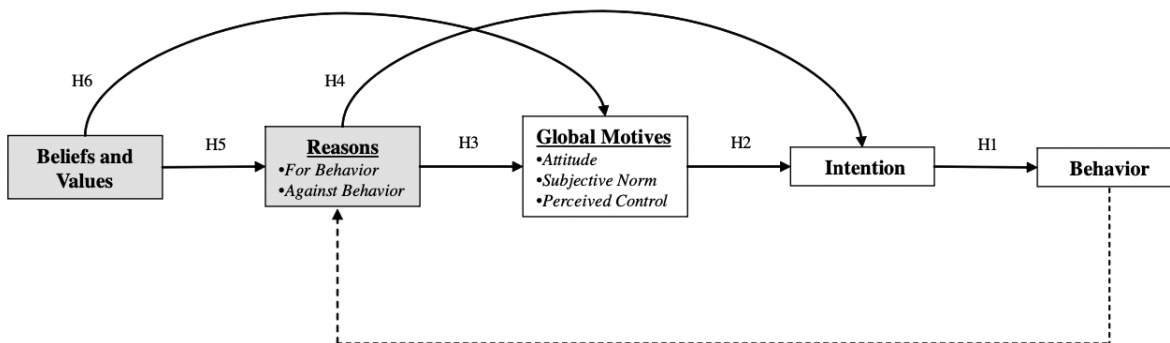
**H7<sub>0,i</sub>:** The influence of consumers' trust of sustainable brands on consumers' sustainable apparel  $Y_i$  is not mediated by consumer attitude

**Table 4.4. Summary Table of Hypotheses for Consumer Attitude as a Mediator**

<b>i</b>	<b>X<sub>i</sub></b>	<b>X<sub>i</sub></b>	<b>Y<sub>i</sub></b>
7a	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Consumer Attitude	Purchase Intention
7b	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Consumer Attitude	Sharing Intention (WOM)
7c	Consumer Trust of Sustainable Fashion Brands	Consumer Attitude	Sharing Intention (eWOM)

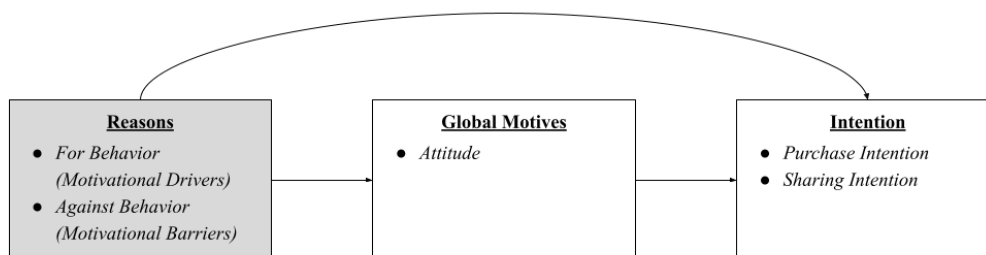
### 4.3 Survey Development

Part II of this study involved the development of a quantitative research instrument based on key findings from Part I. The theoretical model used in Part II of this study was adapted from Westaby's (2005) behavioral reasoning model, seen below in Figure 4.1.



**Figure 4.1.** Behavioral Reasoning Theoretical Model (Westaby, 2005)

Based on findings from Part I of this study, Part II of this study focused on the reasons, global motives, and resulting intentions among young adult consumers in their sustainable fashion consumption behaviors. Reasons for sustainable fashion consumption behavior, referred to as motivational drivers, were identified as signaling behavior, social acceptance, and a desire for uniqueness, while reasons against behavior or ‘motivational barriers’ were identified as consumer trust and willingness to pay. This study prioritizes the global motive of attitudes due to the prevalence of attitude-specific findings from Part I of the study. Finally, intentions were grouped by ‘purchase intention’ and ‘sharing intention’ to adequately capture consumers’ purchase and post-purchase behavior. A depiction of the theoretical model that was tested for Part II of this study can be seen in Figure 4.2.



**Figure 4.2.** Study Part II Theoretical Model Adapted from Westaby (2005)

#### 4.3.1 Survey Scales

This survey was developed to measure several key variables, including green signaling behavior, desire for uniqueness, desire for social acceptance, consumer trust of sustainable fashion brands, willingness to pay for sustainable goods. Scales for consumer attitude, purchase intention, and sharing intention (both electronically and in-person) were also included in the survey, as well as relevant demographic factors like age, gender, and level of education. Scales for the survey instrument used in Part II of this study were adapted from various existing scales in the literature. To measure motivational drivers, scale items for green signaling were adapted from the work of Konuk and Otterbring (2024), scale items for social acceptance were adapted from the external motivations scale used by Nornajihah et al. (2022), and scale items for uniqueness were adapted from Ali et al. (2019). Motivational barrier variables included consumer trust, which was measured using scale items adapted from Herrando et al. (2019), and willingness to pay, measured using scale items adapted from Yadav and Pathak (2017). As previously mentioned, this study focused on the global motive of attitude; these scale items were adapted from the polarized adjective pair items used by Su et al. (2023). Finally, purchase intention was measured using scale items adapted from Ahmed et al. (2022) and sharing intention was measured using a word-of-mouth scale adapted from Kautish and Khare (2022).

The resulting study questionnaire was composed of a combination of multiple choice and Likert-type questions. A breakdown of the survey constructs and their corresponding survey items is found in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5.** Survey Development

Construct	Item	Question	Source
<b>Green Signaling</b>	GS1	I often buy products that communicate the fact that I value sustainability	Konuk & Otterbring, 2024
	GS2	The types of things I do in my spare time (e.g. hobbies) clearly identify me as valuing sustainability	

	GS3	The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as valuing sustainability	
	GS4	The fact that I value sustainability is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations	
	GS5	I am actively involved in activities that communicate to others that I value sustainability	
<b>Uniqueness</b>	U1	I enjoy owning sustainable fashion products that make people think of me as unique and different	Ali et al., 2019
	U2	I usually buy sustainable fashion products and brands to make me feel unique and different	
	U3	I usually buy sustainable fashion products that make me look distinctive	
<b>Social Acceptance</b>	SAC1	Other people would be mad if I do not purchase sustainable apparel	Nornajihah et al., 2022
	SAC2	I purchase sustainable apparel to receive recognition from other people	
	SAC3	My friends encourage me to purchase sustainable apparel	
	SAC4	To avoid being criticized, I purchase sustainable apparel	
<b>Consumer Trust</b>	CT1	Sustainable fashion brands provide reliable information	Herrando et al., 2019
	CT2	Sustainable fashion brands provide accurate information on the item(s) I want to purchase	
	CT3	Sustainable fashion brands provide sufficient information when I try to make a transaction	
	CT4	Sustainable fashion brands are trustworthy	
	CT5	Sustainable fashion brands want to be known as companies that keep their promises	
	CT6	I believe in the information that sustainable fashion brands provide	
<b>Willingness to Pay</b>	WP1	I would pay more for a sustainable apparel product from a brand that is making efforts to be environmentally sustainable	Yadav and Pathak, 2017
	WP2	I would pay more for a sustainable apparel product from a brand that is making charitable contributions	
	WP3	I would pay more for a sustainable apparel product from a brand that is making efforts to be ethically responsible	
<b>Attitude</b>	ATT1	I feel positive about purchasing sustainable apparel from a brand	Su et al., 2023
	ATT2	I feel positive about purchasing apparel sustainably secondhand (i.e. vintage or thrifted apparel)	
	ATT3	I feel positive about sustainable brands in general	
	ATT4	Purchasing sustainable apparel is a positive experience	

	ATT5	Purchasing sustainable apparel is a good idea	
<b>Purchase Intention</b>	PI1	I am willing to pay more for a sustainable fashion product, avoiding cheaper ones that harm the environment	Ahmed et al., 2022
	PI2	I will consider buying sustainable fashion products if they conserve resources	
	PI3	I will consider buying sustainable fashion products if they are made from recycled materials	
	PI4	I will consider buying sustainable fashion products if they are ethically sourced	
	PI5	I will consider buying sustainable fashion products if my purchase supports a charitable cause	
	PI6	I have the perception that sustainable fashion products have more excellent added value, and therefore I am willing to pay more	
<b>Sharing Intention (eWOM)</b>	SI1	I always share my knowledge and information about sustainable apparel online	Kautish & Khare, 2022
	SI2	I recommend sustainable apparel companies online	
	SI3	I share about sustainable apparel purchases with my peers online	
<b>Sharing Intention (WOM)</b>	SI4	I always share my knowledge and information about sustainable apparel in-person	Kautish & Khare, 2022
	SI5	I advocate for sustainable shopping practices	
	SI6	I recommend sustainable apparel companies in-person	
	SI7	I share about sustainable apparel purchases with my peers in-person	

#### 4.3.2 Qualifying Questions

Qualifying questions and attention-check measures were utilized in the development of this survey instrument to ensure the quality of the sample. Qualifying questions for participation in this survey included birth year, which allowed researchers to confirm that survey participants fit within the desired age range of the sample population, location of residence to confirm that participants were based in the United States, and one question regarding whether participants had purchased or procured a sustainable fashion item within the last year; the latter was used to verify that consumers had at least some background knowledge or experience with sustainable fashion, which helps to preserve the integrity of this study. Participants whose answers to these

qualifying questions did not meet the required parameters were prompted to exit the survey before answering any further questions. Attention-check measures were implemented through the use of three attention-check survey items, one at the beginning of the survey and two placed within survey scale matrices (See Appendix B, Q1, Q10 - item 7, & Q15 - item 8).

#### **4.4 Survey Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

Data for this study were collected through the online distribution of the survey to a random sample of Generation Z individuals from a university in the southeastern United States. A total of 3,600 individuals were contacted to participate in the study, and a total of 274 survey responses were collected (response rate = 7.611%). Once data were cleaned to eliminate incomplete or otherwise unusable responses (i.e. those who failed the attention check measures), the final usable sample was  $N = 153$ . Hair et al. (2011) identify partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) as an appropriate method for use in predicting key target constructs, identifying key behavioral ‘drivers,’ and for exploratory research or research that uses an extension of an existing structural theory. For these reasons, data for this study were analyzed using PLS-SEM, a statistical method which yields both reliable and valid analyses with relatively small sample sizes. The data obtained were coded using JMP Pro 17 software, then SmartPLS 4 was used for hypothesis testing and other relevant statistical analyses (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2024).

#### **4.5 Descriptive Analyses**

Since the aim of this study was to capture the perspective of Generation Z individuals, a majority of participants were college-aged (18-22) with some level of college education, but no college degree. Additionally, 76.5% of study participants identified as female. A complete breakdown of participants’ descriptive statistics is found below in Table 4.6.

**Table 4.6.** Descriptive Statistics of Participant Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (n=153)	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
18	17	11.111%
19	41	26.797%
20	47	30.719%
21	27	17.647%
22	11	7.190%
23	7	4.575%
24	0	0.000%
25	2	1.307%
26	1	0.654%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	26	16.993%
Female	117	76.470%
Non-binary / third gender	7	4.575%
Prefer not to say	3	1.961%
<b>Level of Education</b>		
High school diploma or equivalent	11	7.190%
Some college, no degree	121	79.085%
Associate degree	9	5.882%
Bachelor's degree	12	7.843%

## 4.6 Measurement Model

### 4.6.1 Construct Validity

In the first stage of data analysis, construct validity of the measurement model was assessed using several measures of convergent and discriminant validity. All items with factor loadings greater than 0.70, composite reliability ( $\rho_a$ ) greater than 0.70, Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.60, and average variance extracted (AVE) greater than 0.60 were maintained in the model; any items or constructs that did not meet these criteria were excluded from further analyses (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2024). Results from these convergent validity analyses can be seen in Table 4.7.

**Table 4.7.** Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Loadings	Items Deleted	AVE	rho a (>0.70)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ (>0.60)
Green Signaling	GS1	0.716	GS3	0.622	0.797	0.796
	GS2	0.779				
	GS4	0.836				
	GS5	0.818				
Uniqueness	U1	0.896		0.793	0.871	0.869
	U2	0.900				
	U3	0.875				
Social Acceptance						
Consumer Trust	CT1	0.830	CT5	0.675	0.881	0.880
	CT2	0.812				
	CT3	0.829				
	CT4	0.840				
	CT6	0.796				
Willingness to Pay	WP1	0.932	WP2	0.868	0.848	0.848
	WP3	0.931				
Attitude	ATT1	0.847	ATT2	0.690	0.852	0.847
	ATT3	0.863				
	ATT4	0.887				
	ATT5	0.714				
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.816	PI5	0.631	0.860	0.854
	PI2	0.819				
	PI3	0.787				

	PI4	0.814				
	PI6	0.732				
Sharing Intention (eWOM)	SI1	0.920		0.782	0.882	0.862
	SI2	0.876				
	SI3	0.856				
Sharing Intention (WOM)	SI4	0.827		0.703	0.870	0.860
	SI5	0.846				
	SI6	0.811				
	SI7	0.869				

Further visualization of the loading values for each item and construct within the study model can be seen below in Figure 4.3.

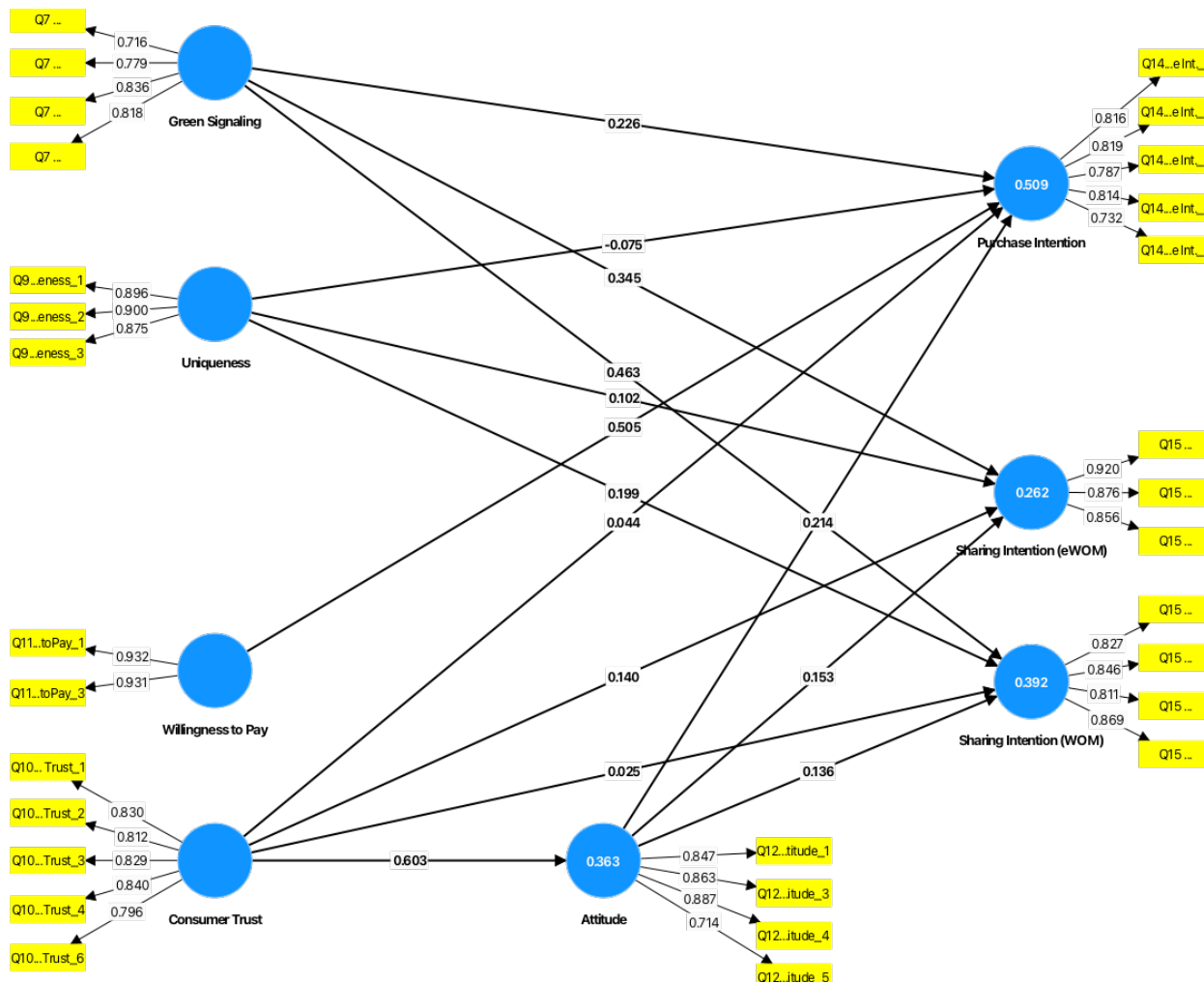


Figure 4.3. PLS-SEM Model with Loading Values

### 4.6.2 Discriminant Validity

To establish the discriminant validity of the model, both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio were evaluated for each of the constructs. As seen in Table 4.8, the Fornell-Larcker criterion for all of the constructs being tested were found to be sufficient (i.e. the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlation between those constructs and any other construct being evaluated) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 4.8. Discriminant Validity - Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	ATT	CT	GS	PI	SI (WOM)	SI (eWOM)	U	WP
ATT	0.831							

<b>CT</b>	0.603	0.822						
<b>GS</b>	0.202	0.037	0.789					
<b>PI</b>	0.438	0.270	0.404	0.794				
<b>SI (WOM)</b>	0.280	0.146	0.575	0.355	0.839			
<b>SI (eWOM)</b>	0.325	0.256	0.424	0.222	0.474	0.884		
<b>U</b>	0.181	0.109	0.423	0.171	0.422	0.291	0.890	
<b>WP</b>	0.329	0.192	0.326	0.642	0.338	0.202	0.211	0.932

Discriminant validity was also confirmed by examining the HTMT ratio; results from this analysis can be seen below in Table 4.9. All HTMT values are below the acceptable level of discriminant validity ( $< 0.90$ ) (Ringle et al., 2023).

**Table 4.9.** Discriminant Validity - Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio

	<b>ATT</b>	<b>CT</b>	<b>GS</b>	<b>PI</b>	<b>SI (WOM)</b>	<b>SI (eWOM)</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>WP</b>
<b>ATT</b>								
<b>CT</b>	0.695							
<b>GS</b>	0.249	0.159						
<b>PI</b>	0.522	0.313	0.478					
<b>SI (WOM)</b>	0.329	0.171	0.691	0.412				
<b>SI (eWOM)</b>	0.384	0.299	0.498	0.251	0.551			
<b>U</b>	0.210	0.126	0.506	0.198	0.476	0.332		
<b>WP</b>	0.389	0.223	0.396	0.734	0.398	0.227	0.245	

Establishing both convergent and discriminant validity for the structural model is a critical step in data analysis, providing foundational support for the reliability and validity of hypothesis testing results.

#### 4.6.3 Model Fit

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of the estimated model used for this study is 0.093, which is within the generally accepted threshold of less than 0.10 (Henseler et al., 2014). It is worth noting that literature surrounding the use of model fit indices in PLS-SEM is still evolving; for this reason, additional fit indices for the bootstrap-based model used in this study are not reported herein (Dash and Paul, 2021; Ringle et al., 2024).

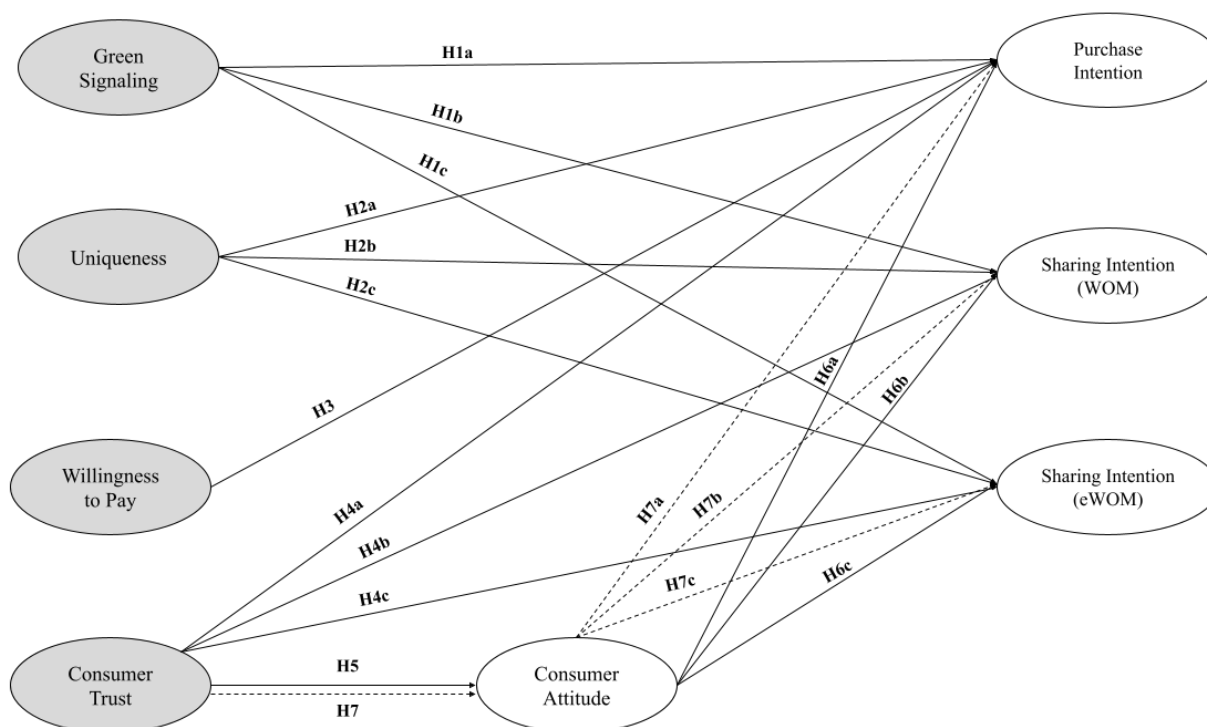
The adjusted r-square values for each of the endogenous variables in the study are reported below in Table 4.10. Since partial least squares structural equation modeling is a regression technique, it is arguably more appropriate to use adjusted r-square as an indicator of model performance than the aforementioned model fit indices. In our bootstrapped model, the adjusted r-square values for all of our variables are statistically significant, indicating that the model has a sufficient level of explanatory power. Adjusted r-squared values for the bootstrapped model are noted below as ‘bootstrapped sample means’ for each of the endogenous variables in Table 4.10.

**Table 4.10.** Adjusted R-Square

	<b>Original Sample</b>	<b>Bootstrapped Sample Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>T statistics</b>	<b>P values</b>
<b>Attitude</b>	0.359	0.365	0.078	4.626	0.000
<b>Purchase Intention</b>	0.492	0.513	0.062	7.895	0.000
<b>Sharing Intention (WOM)</b>	0.375	0.401	0.072	5.228	0.000
<b>Sharing Intention (eWOM)</b>	0.242	0.263	0.059	4.069	0.000

#### **4.7 Structural Model Assessment**

Once construct validity was established, the final structural model was bootstrapped with a total of 10,000 subsamples in order to assess relationships between the constructs being tested. Figure 4.4 outlines the theoretical model for Part II of this study and the hypotheses being tested.



**Figure 4.4.** Theoretical Model

The paths of all structural relationships evaluated during hypothesis testing and their corresponding p-values and bootstrapped sample means are shown in Table 4.11.

**Table 4.11.** Structural Relationships and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Bootstrapped Sample Mean of Path Coefficient	p-value	Decision
<b>H1</b>	A. Green Signaling → Purchase Intention	0.227	0.003	Supported
	B. Green Signaling → Sharing Intention (WOM)	0.462	0.000	Supported
	C. Green Signaling → Sharing Intention (eWOM)	0.346	0.000	Supported
<b>H2</b>	A. Uniqueness → Purchase Intention	-0.075	0.208	Not Supported
	B. Uniqueness → Sharing Intention (WOM)	0.200	0.018	Supported

	C. Uniqueness → Sharing Intention (eWOM)	0.104	0.144	Not Supported
<b>H3</b>	Willingness to Pay → Purchase Intention	0.505	0.000	Supported
<b>H4</b>	A. Consumer Trust → Purchase Intention	0.046	0.535	Not Supported
	B. Consumer Trust → Sharing Intention (WOM)	0.025	0.799	Not Supported
	C. Consumer Trust → Sharing Intention (eWOM)	0.145	0.130	Not Supported
<b>H5</b>	Consumer Trust → Attitude	0.604	0.000	Supported
<b>H6</b>	A. Attitude → Purchase Intention	0.212	0.014	Supported
	B. Attitude → Sharing Intention (WOM)	0.139	0.155	Not Supported
	C. Attitude → Sharing Intention (eWOM)	0.147	0.084	Not Supported
<b>H7</b>	A. Consumer Trust → Attitude → Purchase Intention	0.128	0.017	Supported
	B. Consumer Trust → Attitude → Sharing Intention (WOM)	0.083	0.156	Not Supported
	C. Consumer Trust → Attitude → Sharing Intention (eWOM)	0.089	0.100	Not Supported

Hypothesis 1 asserted that consumers' desire for green signaling would drive their purchase intention, sharing intention (WOM), and sharing intention (eWOM). All three of these hypotheses (H1a, H1b, and H1c) were supported ( $p$ -values = 0.003, 0.000, 0.000, respectively).

Hypothesis 2 asserted that consumers' desire for uniqueness would drive their purchase intention, sharing intention (WOM), and sharing intention (eWOM). While H2a and H2c were not supported ( $p$ -values = 0.208 and 0.144, respectively), consumers' desire for uniqueness was found to have a direct effect on their in-person sharing intention (WOM), so H2b was supported ( $p$ -value = 0.018).

Hypothesis 3 asserted that consumers' willingness to pay for sustainable fashion goods would impact their purchase intention. Hypothesis testing results indicated that consumers' willingness to pay had a significant direct effect on their purchase intention, so H3 is supported (p-value = 0.000).

Hypothesis 4 asserted that consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands has a statistically significant direct effect on their purchase and sharing intention (both WOM and eWOM) related to sustainable fashion goods. Hypothesis testing results indicated that H4a, H4b, and H4c were not supported (p-values = 0.535, 0.799, 0.130, respectively).

Hypothesis 5 asserted that consumers' trust of sustainable fashion brands has a statistically significant direct effect on their attitudes towards sustainable fashion consumption. Results indicated that this hypothesis (H5) was supported (p-value = 0.000).

Hypothesis 6 asserted that consumers' attitudes towards sustainable fashion brands would impact their purchase intention and sharing intention (both WOM and eWOM) related to sustainable fashion goods. Results demonstrated that consumers' attitude towards sustainable apparel consumption had a statistically significant direct effect on their purchase intention, so H6a was supported (p-value = 0.014). Consumer attitude was not found to have a direct effect on sharing intention either in-person (WOM) or online (eWOM), so H6b and H6c were not supported (p-values = 0.155 and 0.084, respectively).

Finally, Hypothesis 7 asserted that consumer attitude mediates the effect of consumers' trust of sustainable fashion brands on their purchase and/or sharing intention. Results indicated that consumer attitudes mediated the effect of consumer trust on purchase intention, but not the effect of consumer trust on sharing intention either in-person (WOM) or online (eWOM); therefore, H7a is supported, but H7b and H7c are not (p-values 0.017, 0.156, and 0.100,

respectively). A model highlighting all of the tested hypotheses and their corresponding p-values can be seen below in Figure 4.5.

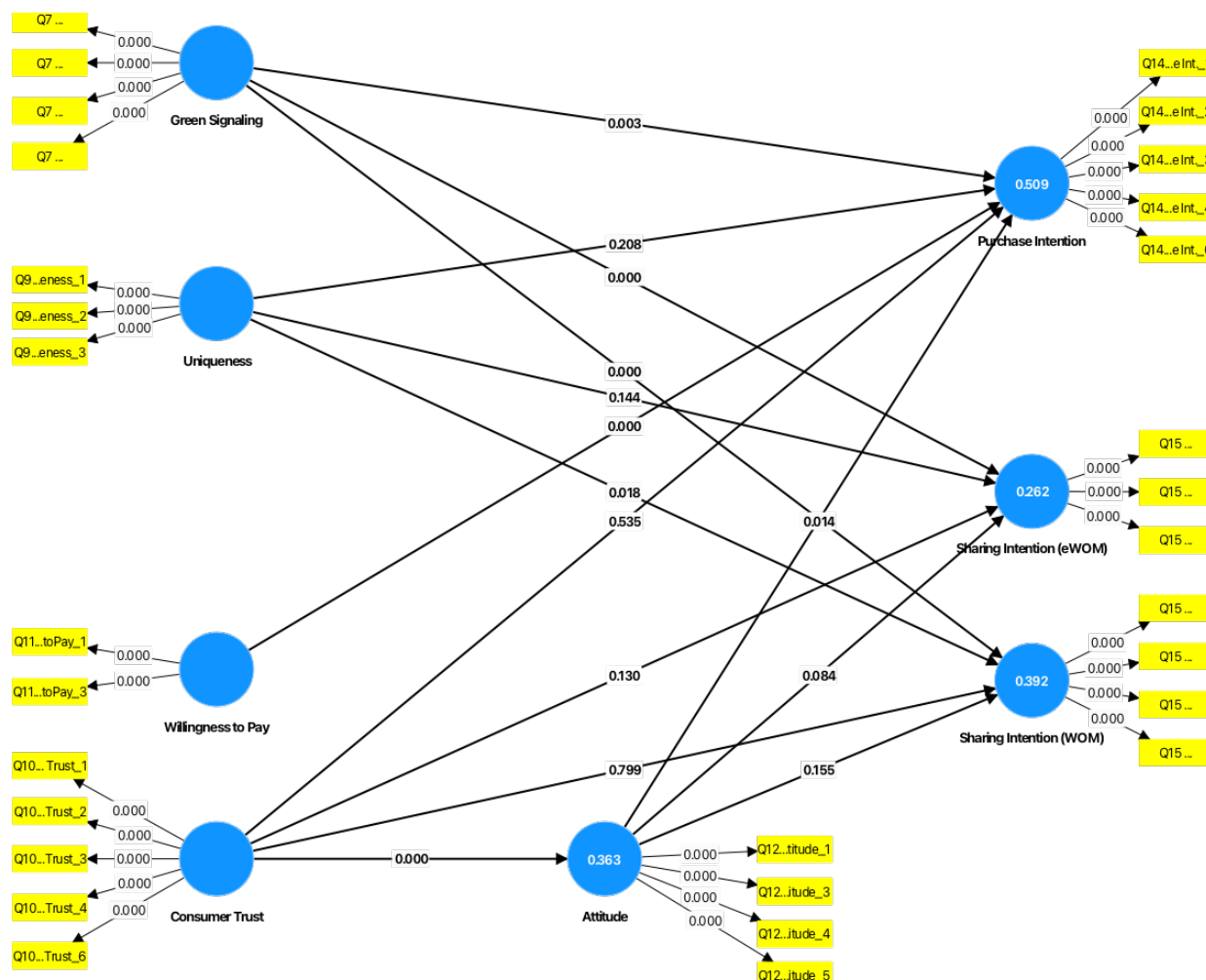


Figure 4.5. Bootstrapping Model with p-values

## 4.8 Key Assumptions and Limitations

### 4.8.1 Study Assumptions

Once results from Part I of the study were incorporated into a quantitative research instrument, the second part of this study involved a significantly larger sample of the target population. It is assumed that the acquired sample of participants aged 18-26 provided an adequate representation of Generation Z consumers. It is also assumed that the perspectives captured in both parts of this study are, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, aligned with

the goals of this study. Finally, it is assumed that the research instrument developed for Part II of this study reliably measures its intended variables and that respondents who took part in this study did so to the best of their ability, taking time to thoughtfully consider each question and responding in a way that was true to their experiences.

#### **4.8.2 Study Limitations**

As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, responses from Part I were used in the development of the quantitative research instrument for Part II of this study; as such, the generalizability of findings may be limited by the subset of Generation Z consumers interviewed in Part I. Additional limitations of quantitative research include challenges with data analysis, determining the reliability and validity of quantitative measures, and maintaining objectivity when creating surveys and analyzing findings. This survey was distributed online to a group of participants in the United States, and while online survey distribution provides the advantage of allowing for a broader pool of respondents, it can be difficult to ensure that quality responses are received. To mitigate this limitation, attention check and quality control measures were implemented to ensure that the final data obtained were of optimal quality. Finally, it is worth noting that there could be other variables not modeled in this study that would have affected the results, including potential direct effects and mediation effects.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the various consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Additionally, this study sought to understand how motivational drivers and barriers influence consumers' desire to purchase sustainable fashion goods and to share about those purchases with their peers. In Part I of this study, a focus group methodology was employed to explore Generation Z consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Several key attributes of sustainable fashion businesses across all three of the core pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) were identified by these consumers, including transparency, manufacturing and production processes, the end use of a garment, ethical treatment of people, affordability, long-lastingness (durability/quality), charity/donation, and whether a brand was impact-driven. Focus group participants described the ways that each of these attributes impacted their attitude towards sustainable fashion brands and their consumption of sustainable fashion goods, with many expressing a desire for clear, specific communication about a product's attributes when shopping for sustainable goods, particularly from brands whom they expected to possess these critical attributes. A propensity for secondhand and thrifted apparel consumption was also observed among this sample population, and participants' 'green signaling' behaviors manifested in their desire to share about sustainable purchases with their peers and to educate other consumers about the benefits of shopping sustainably and/or thrifting for apparel.

Part II of this study expanded upon findings from Part I and observations from extant literature. A quantitative survey instrument was developed to examine key motivational drivers

for sustainable consumption like green signaling, a desire for uniqueness, and a desire for social acceptance, as well as motivational barriers like willingness to pay and consumer trust of sustainable fashion brands. Consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion brands, their purchase intention related to sustainable apparel, and their sharing intention both online (eWOM) and in-person (WOM), served as dependent variables. Hypothesis testing was conducted with the use of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), and results indicated that eight of the seventeen study hypotheses were supported. Some of the strongest relationships observed within these results included the impact of green signaling behaviors on in-person sharing intention (H1b p-value = 0.000; bootstrapped sample mean of path coefficient = 0.462), the impact of willingness to pay on purchase intention (H3 p-value 0.000, bootstrapped sample mean of path coefficient = 0.505), and the impact of consumers' trust of sustainable fashion businesses on their attitudes toward those businesses (H4 p-value = 0.000, bootstrapped sample mean of path coefficient = 0.604).

## **5.2 Discussion of Findings**

This study had four primary objectives, the first of which was to define the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that are important to young adult consumers in their alternative evaluation and purchase decision-making processes. Through the use of a group multivoting exercise, focus group participants defined and ranked the attributes of sustainable fashion businesses that were most important to them, with transparency, manufacturing and production processes, the end use of a garment, ethical treatment of people, affordability, long-lastingness (durability/quality), charity/donation, and whether a brand was impact-driven emerging as the top priorities for these Generation Z consumers. Consumers discussed these attributes at length, explaining how each of these attributes impacted their attitudes toward apparel brands and their

willingness to purchase sustainable apparel. McLaren and Goworek (2017) had previously identified product quality and longevity, price, and brand trust as influential factors for consumers aged 18-35 in the UK; findings from this study align with extant literature and provide additional insights of value about the factors that influence American Generation Z attitudes and purchase decisions.

The second research objective of this study was to understand the impact of sustainable business practices on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors. Part I of this study revealed that for many Generation Z consumers, the affordability of a garment heavily influenced their willingness to purchase it; this is consistent with previous literature, which indicates that cost is often a significant motivational barrier that negatively impacts young adult consumers' sustainable fashion consumption (Diddi et al., 2019; Kreuzer et al., 2019). Part II of this study provided additional support for these findings, with a statistically significant relationship observed between consumers' willingness to pay for sustainable apparel and their purchase intention (H3). While previous studies indicated that Generation Z consumers had a negative perception of secondhand goods, observations from Part I of this study indicated that Generation Z consumers strongly supported the consumption of secondhand apparel, with several consumers noting that thrifting was their primary means of shopping for sustainable fashion goods (Kovacs, 2021).

Company transparency was another top priority of Generation Z consumers, with consumers expressing a desire for specific, actionable information regarding apparel brands' environmental, social, and economic sustainability efforts. Consumers also noted a distrust of sustainable marketing and, in some cases, sustainable fashion brands in general; this finding is consistent with findings from previous studies and was explored further in Part II (Policarpo et

al., 2023). Findings from Part II of this study indicated that consumer trust of sustainable apparel brands had a statistically significant effect on their attitude towards those brands (H5), which is consistent with the findings of McLaren and Goworek (2017).

The effect of consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands on their purchase and sharing intentions was tested both directly and indirectly, with the latter using consumer attitudes as a mediator. Interestingly, while consumer trust was not found to have statistically significant direct effects on purchase intention, there was a statistically significant total mediation effect observed in support of H7a, whereby consumer attitude towards sustainable apparel consumption was found to mediate the effect of consumers' trust of sustainable apparel brands on their sustainable apparel purchase intention. This finding suggests that consumer attitudes are the mechanism by which consumer trust affects purchase intentions, which is consistent with anecdotal evidence from Part I of the study. Additionally, while participants in Part I expressed a clear desire to educate their peers about sustainable apparel brands and purchases, hypotheses pertaining to the direct effect of consumers' attitudes toward sustainable consumption on their sharing intentions both in-person (WOM) and online (eWOM) were not supported (H6b, H6c). Consumer attitudes were also not found to mediate the effects of consumer trust on sharing intentions (WOM or eWOM) (H7b, H7c).

The third research objective of this study was to understand the role of status and/or green signaling in consumers' purchase behavior related to sustainable fashion goods. Anecdotally, participants in Part I of this study expressed a desire to share about the sustainable attributes of their apparel purchases with peers, with one participant noting, "if (sustainability) is the reason why I bought the item, it's probably going to be the first thing that I tell people about it." Participants also aimed to educate their peers and fellow consumers on the benefits of

shopping sustainably, particularly when sharing about thrifted items; in this context, participants were not necessarily able to share about where a particular garment was purchased since many thrifted garments are one-of-one, so they took the opportunity to instead share about their favorite thrift stores and the benefits of secondhand apparel consumption. Part II established green signaling as a powerful motivating driver for Generation Z consumers, impacting consumers' purchase and sharing intentions (both online and in-person) at a statistically significant level (H1a, H1b, H1c). These findings support those from previous literature which indicate that consumers' intent to purchase sustainable apparel may be increased when items can be clearly identified as having sustainable attributes (Berger, 2019).

The fourth and final research objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of various motivational drivers and barriers on consumers' purchase and sharing intention related to sustainable fashion goods. As previously mentioned, the motivational barrier of consumers' willingness to pay for sustainable apparel was found to have a statistically significant effect on purchase intention (H3); this finding is consistent with those of previous studies (Kumar et al., 2021; Tong and Su, 2018; Chi et al., 2021). Despite indications from previous literature that consumers' brand trust had a significant effect on green product purchase and sharing intentions, Part II of this study found no significant direct effects of consumer trust on sustainable apparel purchase intention or sharing intentions, which could indicate a difference in the behaviors of Generation Z consumers in the United States compared to those of other consumer groups and/or serve as an indication that behavioral intentions specific to sustainable apparel are different than behavioral intentions toward footwear or green products in general (Román-Augusto et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2016; Chen and Chang, 2012; Kang and Hustvedt, 2014).

The motivational driver of green signaling was also observed to have a statistically significant effect on purchase and sharing intentions (H1a, H1b, H1c), providing support for the anecdotal evidence obtained in Part I. Participants in Part I identified a desire for uniqueness drove their consumption of sustainable fashion goods, particularly when it came to thrifted goods which are often one-of-a-kind. Part II of this study found that the desire for uniqueness did serve as a motivational driver for in-person sharing intention (H2b), which aligns with focus group participants' stories of sharing about thrift store purchases with their peers. However, the desire for uniqueness did not have a statistically significant impact on Generation Z consumers' purchase intention or online sharing intention, so H2a and H2c were not supported; these results differ from the initial findings from Part I and from the findings of several prior studies, though the majority of the studies referenced focused on collaborative consumption, not necessarily secondhand apparel consumption or firsthand consumption of apparel via purchase from a sustainable brand (Zebal and Jackson, 2019; McCoy et al., 2021; Lang and Joyner Armstrong, 2018). The final motivational driver for sustainable fashion purchase and sharing intention identified in Part I of this study was a desire for social acceptance. Participants described experiencing a sense of joy and pride when sharing about a sustainable purchase, contrasted with feelings of shame when asked about garments they had purchased from fast fashion businesses. Due to issues with convergent validity, the scale used to measure desire for social acceptance in Part II of the study was deemed unusable; for this reason, desire for social acceptance as a motivational driver of sustainable fashion consumption can be regarded as important based on the firsthand accounts of focus group participants, but further statistical evidence regarding this relationship was not obtained through Part II.

In accordance with the Westaby (2005) behavioral reasoning theory, consumer attitudes were also evaluated in Part II of this study as a global motive that influenced participants' purchase and sharing intentions. Findings indicated that attitude had a statistically significant impact on consumers' purchase intention (H6a), which was consistent with findings from previous literature (Nguyen et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2024; Yadav and Pathak, 2016). Attitude was also found to mediate the relationship between consumers' trust of sustainable fashion brands and their sustainable apparel purchase intentions; this finding aligns with observations from Part I of this study (H7a). Participants in Part I noted that their attitude towards sustainable fashion brands could be influenced by whether a brand possessed certain sustainable attributes; these attributes were not individually assessed in the survey instrument used for Part II of this study, but these findings provide a valuable foundation for future research on the impact of sustainable fashion attributes on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors.

### **5.3 Theoretical and Managerial Implications**

#### **5.3.1 Theoretical Implications**

From a theoretical standpoint, the most significant contribution of this study is the support provided for Berger's (2019) green signaling theory, a relatively new theory which expands on the concepts of status consumption and signaling theory. Findings from Part I of this study indicate that Generation Z consumers purchase sustainable fashion goods for the sake of sharing about them with their peers; this sharing intention stems from a desire for social acceptance and a desire to educate consumers about the benefits of sustainable fashion consumption. Findings from Part II of this study provide additional statistical evidence that suggests consumers' green signaling behaviors are a motivational driver that influences their purchase intention and sharing intention (both online and in-person) related to sustainable

fashion goods (H1a, H1b, H1c). It is worth noting that, when asked directly about whether purchasing sustainable fashion goods gave them an elevated sense of status, participants in Part I expressed that sustainable consumption boosted their self-confidence, but did not make them feel ‘better than’ other consumers. Additionally, the scale used to measure green signaling behaviors in Part II of this study referenced consumers’ value of sustainability on the whole, not individual attributes of sustainable products or brands that might be recognizable to other consumers. Findings from this study provide meaningful insights regarding the green signaling behaviors of Generation Z consumers and their impact on both purchase and sharing intentions, a valuable contribution to a relatively new body of theoretical literature.

### **5.3.2 Managerial Implications**

From a managerial perspective, one of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of the sustainable fashion attributes that Generation Z consumers prioritize when shopping for sustainable apparel. Consumers expressed a clear desire for corporate transparency, ethical treatment of workers, and responsible manufacturing and production processes, as well as charitable and/or impact-driven business models. Focus group participants noted that from their perspective, marketing a product as ‘sustainable’ was not enough; companies needed to provide specific information about the attributes a product possessed in a way that was accessible and easily-understood. These insights are particularly valuable for sustainable apparel brands looking to reach the young adult population as they clearly define consumers’ expectations in terms of corporate sustainability and social responsibility, but they also provide brands with information on how to communicate their actions with a young audience. When brands possess these attributes, they can prioritize them in brand communications - product descriptions, hang tags, social media content, merchandising and

marketing efforts, etc. - to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability to a generation whose knowledge about sustainability can cause them to be skeptical about generic marketing efforts.

Consumers also identified the affordability and durability or long-lastingness of a garment as key factors influencing their purchase decision-making, and consumers' willingness to pay for sustainable apparel was found to be a statistically significant driver of sustainable apparel purchase intention (H3). Historically, the affordability of sustainable apparel has been a tension point for young consumers, with previous studies noting an intention-behavior gap in the consumption of sustainable apparel due to the high cost associated with these goods (Diddi et al., 2019; Kreuzer et al., 2019). While thrifting and other secondhand apparel consumption options help to reduce the cost associated with sustainable apparel consumption, other efforts made by sustainable apparel brands to make their goods more affordable for Generation Z consumers, many of whom have a more limited income, would be welcomed by this consumer group. Companies can also appeal to Generation Z consumers by communicating the non-monetary value of their goods in product promotion efforts; this value could include garment durability, functionality, or aesthetical appeal, but it could also encompass factors like charitable partnerships, ethical manufacturing, or other innovative technologies used in garment manufacturing. Clear communication about these attributes is likely to appeal to Generation Z consumers, which is critical for brands to keep in mind when looking to create and market products for these young shoppers.

Findings from Part I and Part II of this study also demonstrate the importance of consumers' trust of sustainable fashion brands in shaping their attitudes and, by association, their sustainable apparel purchase intentions. Conversations in Part I of this study revealed that Generation Z consumers have particular expectations about the attributes that a sustainable

fashion brand should possess, and that their attitude towards a brand is negatively affected when brands lack those attributes or only possess those attributes in a portion of their product offerings (e.g. sustainable 'lines' versus sustainable brands). Additionally, consumers' deeply-rooted mistrust of sustainable marketing, likely stemming from the negative influence of greenwashing, emerged as a key factor that shaped how consumers preferred to receive information about a product's sustainable attributes; consumers expressed a clear desire for specific, easily-accessible information about the attributes of a garment. Taking these findings one step further, the role of consumer trust as a motivational barrier for consumer purchase and sharing intentions related to sustainable fashion goods was evaluated in Part II of this study, using the global motive of consumer attitudes as a moderating factor. The statistically significant direct effect of consumers' trust of sustainable fashion brands on their attitudes toward sustainable fashion (H5) and the total mediation effect of consumer attitudes on the effect of consumer trust on sustainable apparel purchase intention (H7a) is imperative for sustainable fashion brands to understand. Building trust with young adult consumers should be a top priority for brands looking to reach this target market, even when it means owning up to previous mistakes or acknowledging shortcomings and areas of planned improvement. This study clearly defines the importance of a strong, trusting relationship between brands and their consumers, and brands' efforts to establish trust with their consumer base is likely to go a long way in positively shaping Generation Z consumers' attitudes towards those brands, which will in turn impact their behavioral intentions.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

One of the distinct limitations of this study is the relatively small sample size obtained for both parts of the study. Additionally, both samples used for this study were composed of

Generation Z consumers who were students at a large southeastern university, meaning they were relatively uniform in their demographic characteristics (age, level of education).

Replication of this study with slightly larger focus groups, more than two focus group sessions, and/or a larger sample of survey participants could provide valuable insights beyond those obtained for the subset of Generation Z consumers explored in this study. Additional exploration of these topics among non-student Generation Z consumers could also improve the generalizability of the results to the larger Generation Z consumer base; for example, the majority of participants in Part II of this study were under the age of 22, while Generation Z encompasses individuals up to 26 years of age in 2024. There is also a noteworthy opportunity for future research among different generational cohorts. While previous literature has explored the perspectives of Generation X and Millennial consumers more widely than Generation Z, the young age of Generation Z consumers means that the body of research literature on this consumer group has significant potential for growth; replicating parts of this study with cross-generational samples would allow for the comparison of these consumer behaviors among generational cohorts, which could yield interesting insights that would be impactful from a theoretical and managerial perspective.

Findings from Part I of this study included observations surrounding consumers' willingness to pay more for sustainable goods and conversations about how much more they might be willing to pay for products with different sustainable attributes. While specific attributes were not covered in Part II of this study, these findings provide a strong foundation for future research on which specific product attributes might influence consumer purchase and sharing intentions. Additionally, social acceptance emerged in Part I of this study as a potential motivational driver for Generation Z purchase and sharing intention related to sustainable

apparel, and although a scale to measure social acceptance was included in the survey for Part II, it did not meet the threshold for convergent validity and therefore was excluded from data analysis. Generation Z has been identified as a generation who values the opinions of their peers, so future research on the role of young consumers' desire for social acceptance in shaping their sustainable apparel purchase and sharing behaviors is likely worthwhile.

In Part I of this study, the key product attributes of transparency, manufacturing and production processes, the end use of a garment, ethical treatment of people, affordability, long-lastingness (durability/quality), charity/donation, and whether a brand was impact-driven were identified as top priorities among Generation Z consumers. These attributes were utilized in the adaptation of survey scales used in Part II of this study, but ultimately the analyses conducted for Part II examined sustainable fashion attitudes and behaviors in aggregate. There is a valuable opportunity for future research that delves deeper into specific product attributes and their individual impact on consumers' attitudes and consumption behaviors, both from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. Additional research could also be conducted to identify how consumers prefer to receive information about a sustainable fashion product's attributes – brand website, product hang tag, social media posts, etc. – and which attributes rank highest on their priority list when shopping for sustainable apparel.

Finally, data on consumers' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and level of education, were collected in Part II of this study, but were not evaluated beyond providing descriptive statistics about the study's sample population. Future research could provide meaningful insights on the connection between these demographic characteristics and the variables from this study, both independent and dependent. Additionally, future studies on the relationship between consumers' income level and their sustainable fashion purchase intention

could prove interesting, especially since consumers' willingness to pay was identified as a statistically significant variable connected to purchase intention in this study. Exploration of Generation Z consumers' level of education specific to sustainability and its impact on their attitudes toward sustainable fashion brands and/or their purchase and sharing intention may also be of interest, as consumers' trust of brands, which had a notable impact on their attitude towards sustainable fashion brands in this study, is often shaped by their knowledge about brands' behaviors.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Sustainable Fashion Attributes and their Impact on Consumers' Attitudes and Consumption Behaviors: Focus Group Interviews Discussion Guide (Allotted Time: 1 Hour)

- I. Introductions (5 Minutes)
  - Researcher will introduce herself and share a brief description of the study's purpose
  - Researcher will ask participants to introduce themselves and answer an icebreaker question in order to familiarize the group members with one another and increase the overall comfortability level among the participants
  
- II. Defining 'Sustainability' (5-10 Minutes)
  - This part of the discussion will focus on getting a baseline understanding of participants' definition of sustainability and their attitudes toward sustainability as a concept
  - This discussion will begin with the following question: **When you hear the term 'sustainability,' what is the first thing that comes to mind?**
  - Additional probes may include, but are not limited to, the following:
    - What was your first introduction to the concept of sustainability?
    - Do you have negative or positive associations with the term sustainability?
    - What else do you relate to or associate with the concept of sustainability?
    - Has your perspective on sustainability changed over time? If so, how?
      - Are there specific events that have changed your perspective?  
How/why?
  
- III. Sustainable Fashion as a Concept (5 Minutes)
  - The purpose of this discussion is to move away from broad discussions of sustainability and towards more specific conversations about the attributes of sustainable fashion products
  - This discussion will begin with the following question: **What comes to your mind when you hear the term 'sustainable fashion'?**
  - Additional probes may include, but are not limited to, the following:
    - What brands do you associate with sustainable fashion?
    - When did you become familiar with the concept of sustainable fashion?
    - How often do you shop for sustainable fashion products vs. traditional fashion or fast fashion products?
  
- IV. Specific Sustainable Fashion Attributes (15 Minutes)

- This discussion will allow participants to be more specific about the attribute(s) they believe a sustainable fashion product should possess and the way that these attributes shape their attitudes and behaviors as consumers
- This discussion will begin with the following question: **What attributes do you think a sustainable fashion product should possess and why?**
- Additional probes may include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Which of these attributes is most important to you? (see **Group Exercise** below)
  - If a product does not possess these attributes, does that affect your attitude towards the product? Toward the business?
  - If a product does not possess these attributes, does that impact your willingness to purchase the product?
    - These questions can be tailored to the specific attributes mentioned by the group in earlier points of the discussion
  - In general, what is your attitude towards sustainable fashion? Towards sustainable fashion businesses?
    - Which businesses (or types of businesses) do you have positive associations with? Negative associations?
- **Group Exercise: Ranking Sustainable Fashion Attributes**
  - As the group responds to the initial discussion question for this portion of the focus group, the moderator will write down each attribute on a large post-it board for everyone to see
  - After all have stated their attributes, the moderator will ask the group to decide which attributes are most important to them; specifically, the group will be asked to participate in a multivoting activity using the dot approach. Participants will each be given five colored dots which they will use to indicate their individual ‘top five’ attributes. The collective ‘top five’ attributes will be identified as the five attributes with the highest number of dots.
  - Once the list of attributes has been narrowed to the five most important, each participant will be asked to rank those top five attributes in order of most important (1) to least important (5)

#### V. Sustainable Fashion Consumption Behavior (10 Minutes)

- This discussion provides the group with an opportunity to discuss their sustainable fashion consumption behaviors on a more concrete level
- This discussion will begin with the following question: **When was the last time you bought a sustainable fashion product?**
- Additional probes may include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - What were some of the reasons that contributed to you buying this product?

- Where did you buy this product?
- Was this a planned purchase or an impulse purchase?
- If a product is advertised as sustainable, are you more likely to purchase it?
  - How does cost impact this choice? Are there any other factors that may influence your decision to purchase?
- How often do you shop for apparel in general?

VI. Sustainable Fashion Consumption and ‘Green Signaling’ (10 Minutes)

- This discussion will shift the focus towards the concept of ‘green signaling’ and the idea that sustainable fashion purchases may be made as an attempt to indicate status or virtue to others.
- This discussion will begin with the following question: **When you purchase a sustainable fashion good, how often do you tell others about its sustainable attributes (1-10, where 1 is never and 10 is always)**
- Additional probes may include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Do the sustainable attributes of a product add value to the product in your mind? Why / how?
  - When you purchase a sustainable fashion product, how do you feel? (proud? Excited? Any different from other purchase experiences?)
  - Do you feel that wearing sustainable fashion products gives you an elevated sense of status? How or how not?
  - Would you say that sense of status impacts your desire to purchase sustainable fashion goods when possible?

VII. Relevant Discussion Specific to the Focus Area/Pillar of Sustainability (5 Minutes)

- Each focus group will occur at a fashion store specific to a designated pillar of sustainability (economic, environmental, social). This will not be specified to participants ahead of time to avoid influencing the direction of the conversation; however, any remaining time towards the end of the discussion may be used to ask specific questions about a particular pillar of sustainability.
- This discussion will begin with the following question: **How do you define (environmental/social/economic) sustainability?**
- Additional probes may include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - What attributes of sustainable fashion serve as ‘signals’ for this type of sustainability?
    - Do these signals carry status? Why or why not?
  - Which attribute(s) would you consider to be most important?
  - When an environmentally/economically/socially sustainable business does not have a particular attribute, does that impact your overall opinion of their sustainability? How or how not?

## Appendix B

**C1:** You are being asked to complete a survey for research purposes. The purpose of this study is to examine the various consumer-defined attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel. Additionally, this study seeks to understand how motivational drivers and barriers influence consumers' desire to purchase sustainable fashion goods. We will do this through an online survey comprised of a series of questions that will enable us to understand your attitudes and decision-making behaviors related to sustainable apparel product purchases. Completing this survey is voluntary and you can stop at any time by exiting the survey prior to completion. To stop your participation after completing the survey, please contact Sara Lewis Hood at [selewis5@ncsu.edu](mailto:selewis5@ncsu.edu) or Dr. Thoney-Barletta at [kathoney@ncsu.edu](mailto:kathoney@ncsu.edu)

You must be 18 years of age or older, reside in the United States, and have experience with purchasing sustainable fashion goods to participate in this study.

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this survey. If you have any questions about the survey itself, how it is implemented, or survey compensation, please contact Sara Lewis Hood at [selewis5@ncsu.edu](mailto:selewis5@ncsu.edu) or Dr. Thoney-Barletta at [kathoney@ncsu.edu](mailto:kathoney@ncsu.edu) or 919-515-6514. Please reference study number **eIRB #26520** when contacting anyone about this project.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at [IRB-Director@ncsu.edu](mailto:IRB-Director@ncsu.edu), 919-515-8754, or [fill out this confidential form online](#).

By entering this survey, you are consenting to the use of the responses you provide for research purposes. If you consent to complete this survey, please click “Yes, I consent to participate in this study” to proceed into the survey.

- Yes, I consent to participate in this study
- I do not consent

The purpose of this study is to examine the various attributes of sustainable fashion businesses and the impact of these attributes on consumer attitudes and consumption behaviors related to sustainable apparel.

Sustainability is typically defined as having three core pillars – social, environmental, and economic – with each encompassing various sustainable business practices. For the purpose of this survey, 'sustainable fashion goods' are those which align with at least one of these core pillars of sustainability; this includes goods made with environmentally friendly or eco-conscious practices, ethical fashion goods, and goods which contribute to the circular economy (i.e. secondhand, thrifted, or vintage apparel).

**Thank you for taking the time to consider and answer each question to the best of your ability.**

**Q1:** Do you commit to providing your thoughtful and honest answers to the questions in this survey?

- I will provide my best answers
- I will not provide my best answers
- I can't promise either way

**SECTION ONE: DEMOGRAPHICS**

**Q2:** What is your age?

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**Q3:** In the last year, have you purchased a sustainable fashion good?

- Yes
- No

**Q4:** What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

**Q5:** Level of Education

- Some high school education
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree or above

**Q6:** Which of the following have contributed to your knowledge on sustainability and/or sustainable apparel? *Select all that apply.*

- Family / household upbringing
- Friends and/or peers
- High school coursework
- College coursework
- Social media
- Other (please describe)











**SECTION FOUR: Purchase and Sharing Intention**

**Q13:** In the past year, which of the following retail channels have you used to make a sustainable fashion purchase or procure a sustainable apparel product? *Select all that apply.*

- Physical retail store (in-person)
- Thrift store or other secondhand clothing retailer (in-person)
- Sustainable apparel brand website
- Secondhand, thrifted, or vintage apparel brand website (e.g. ThredUp.com)
- Social media shoppable product tag (Instagram shop, TikTok shop, etc.)
- Clothing swap or exchange
- Other (please describe)



