

**Ethical identity, social image, and sustainable fashion:  
Still an impossible deal?  
A socio-psychological framework of ethical consumers' attitude-behavior gaps**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper proposes a multilevel framework of fashion consumer ethics that unpacks how ethical consumers publicly express their identity through sustainable fashion (SF). The author explores SF's cognitive, relational, and contextual dynamics, highlighting how attitude-behavior (A-B) gaps might impede consumers' ethical identity and social image alignment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The framework theoretically reconstructs fashion consumer ethics by integrating social intuitionism, social representation theory, and the public sphere. This theorizing process sheds light on fragmented attempts found in previous research to understand how ethical consumers express their self-identity and socially represent their image through SF, avoiding A-B gaps.

**Findings** – The theoretical propositions suggest how ethical consumers 1) express self-concept at the cognitive level, nurturing ethical commitment toward self-associated fashion brands; 2) manifest social image at the relational level, giving rise to consumers' ethical engagement in SF; 3) self-verify identity-image alignment in the public sphere, thus addressing A-B issues.

**Originality/value** – The socio-psychological approach suggests a novel understanding of ethical consumers' individual and social representation through SF consumption. The framework interprets SF as an 'aesthetic of existence,' co-constructed collectively and symbolically expressed publicly. As a result, the proposed model combines different theories to introduce new causal mechanisms and constructs of ethical consumers' cognition, sociological relations, and public spheres.

**Keywords** – Attitude-behavior gap, Consumer psychology, Ethical consumption, Moral Identity, Peer influence, Sustainable fashion

**Paper type** – Conceptual

## Introduction

Fashion and sustainability represent contradictory concepts that, if pulled together, are interpreted as an ‘oxymoron’ (Atik and Ozdamar Ertekin, 2023; Carranza *et al.*, 2023; Mukendi *et al.*, 2020). Combining the hectic, fast-changing nature of contemporary fashion consumption (i.e., *fast fashion*) with the responsibility and consistency over time required by sustainable fashion (SF) seems like an ‘impossible deal’ (New York Times, 2022). Such a challenge is due to, on the one hand, the little tangible progress made by fashion companies regarding socio-environmental sustainability and, on the other hand, ethical fashion consumers’ inconsistent decisions and behavior (Ramirez *et al.*, 2023). As a result, the SF attitude-behavior (A-B) gap is still unresolved (Govind *et al.*, 2019; Kaur *et al.*, 2023), and ethical consumption in fashion remains a ‘myth’ (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001).

Fashion is highly symbolic for ethical consumers, allowing them to express self-identity and publicly represent social image through fashion consumption (Niinimäki, 2010). SF is exclusive to ethical consumers’ minds and lives and is strongly associated with self-expression and social representation. Hence, fashion becomes an “aesthetic of existence,” a symbolic vehicle driven by the ‘self’ values of ethical consumers who aim at self-actualization when buying fashion products (Davis, 1992). However, when it comes to SF, consumers’ intentions (*talks*) rarely translate into final purchase decisions and actual behaviors (*walks*), so “ethical consumers don’t walk their talk” (Carrington *et al.*, 2010, p.141). A report by Zalando (2021) shows that a gap between fashion consumers’ words and deeds still exists: 60% of fashion consumers say second-hand and repaired products are important, but only 25% regularly buy them; 53% believe buying from sustainable brands with ethical labor policies is essential, but only 23% ever looked at such policies. **Consumers prefer nonethical criteria in purchasing fashion products, such as price, trends, or spatial/temporal convenience (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Hassan *et al.*, 2016; Johnstone and Tan, 2015).** This *ethical purchasing gap* reveals the necessity to understand better the

psychological and sociological mechanisms resulting in consumers' self-contradictory behavior and, thus, 'elusive' fashion consumption (Kautish and Khare, 2022; Shaw *et al.*, 2016).

The pertinent literature is limited in at least three ways. First, scholars have widely used a marketing ethics approach to investigate misalignments between fashion brand identity (i.e., how the company wants to be perceived) and image (i.e., the actual company's positioning in stakeholders' perception) (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). However, consumer research seminally found that ethical consumption matters only if consumers are "*personally* positively or negatively affected by the behavior" (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000, p.365). Hence, we should investigate identity-image misalignments from a consumer ethics ('buyer') perspective, focusing on how such A-B gaps affect SF consumption. Fashion consumers express their moral values, beliefs, and attitudes, aiming to depict an ethical self-identity publicly (Giddens, 1991). Yet, they eventually behave inconsistently by purchasing cheaper or more convenient products from conventional companies. In this way, consumers' social image will not reflect their ethical self-identity (Reed II *et al.*, 2012), thus reinforcing the A-B gap. Exploring the micromechanisms of consumers' self-identity expression and social image representation (Cherrier, 2007) in SF could help reduce the discrepancy between *talks* and *deeds* (Carrington *et al.*, 2010; Hassan *et al.*, 2016)

A second area that needs advancements is the theoretical perspective used to address the fashion consumers' A-B gap. Rationalist perspectives (Rest, 1986) that consider sustainable consumption as a linear, conscious, controlled, and predictable phenomenon (i.e., *System 2* model) traditionally represented the predominant "theoretical prism" in consumer ethics (Hassan *et al.*, 2022, p.115). However, the rationalist perspective "blinds" ethical consumption streams by excessively relying on a sequential fit between consumers' motivations and their moral assumptions (Im *et al.*, 2023, p.15). In the last two decades, a new stream of scholars stressed the need to emphasize the unconscious, intuitionist, and emotive

aspects of consumers' moral judgment and behavior (i.e., *System 1* model) to understand its complexity and inconsistencies more realistically (Clark, 2008; Connolly and Prothero, 2003; Vitell *et al.*, 2013). Such a paradigmatic shift significantly contributes to addressing the A-B gap (Casais and Faria, 2022; Johnstone and Tan, 2015) and exploring how fashion consumers align their ethical identity and social image (Lundblad and Davies, 2016; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Hence, this stream needs more conceptual research to be better incorporated into behavior models of consumer ethics.

A third area that needs more research is the interdisciplinary approach required to investigate consumer ethics microfoundations in fashion. Studying sustainable consumption and A-B gaps under a single psychological or sociological theory (i.e., the TPB or SIT, respectively; Hassan *et al.*, 2022) is insufficient to understand its broader underlying dynamics. Scholars have started analyzing sustainable consumption by combining social psychology and microsociology to understand how cognitive and sociological mechanisms work in parallel (Zollo, 2021). However, these attempts remained general and abstract, thus not contextualizing sustainable consumption in specific industries and concrete realms, such as the fashion sector. Moreover, consumer ethics researchers predominantly use an individual perspective, paying less attention to consumption's social, relational, and communal nature. The SF stream requires a collective approach focused on the role of fashion movements in value co-creation, as happens in sustainable communities (Cavusoglu and Atik, 2021; Gummerus *et al.*, 2017). To understand the contextual dimension of SF consumption, there is a need to investigate how community participation influences consumers' self-identity expression and social image representation (Schultz *et al.*, 2022).

Building on these gaps, the article's **central** research question (RQ) is: *How do ethical consumers express their self-identity and publicly represent their social image through sustainable fashion?*

Given the conceptual nature of the article, our RQ is the result of a theorizing process (Makadok *et al.*, 2018) aimed at conceptualizing a multilevel model that illustrates the dynamics of how ethical consumers 1) self-construe their identity through SF (*cognitive level*); 2) interconnect with other SF consumers to represent their ethical image socially (*relational level*); and 3) manifest their SF consumption in public communities (*contextual level*). Hence, we formulate the following sub-RQs:

RQ1: What underlying cognitive mechanisms develop ethical consumers' self-identity expression through SF consumption?

RQ2: What role do 'relations' and peer influence play in representing ethical consumers' social image?

RQ3: What is the public context where ethical consumers self-verify (mis)alignments between their identity and image?

To answer these RQs, we develop a framework of fashion consumer ethics, unpacking consumers' self-identity expression and social image representation dynamics. The model derives new theoretical insights by integrating ideas from different domains (Thatcher and Fisher, 2022), namely social psychology (Haidt, 2001; Moscovici, 1981), microsociology (Solomon, 1983), and Habermas' (1962/1991) public sphere (PS). The aim is to understand the principles of ethical consumers' identity and image (mis)alignments, thus contributing to the discussion on A-B gaps in SF. In this way, we offer a novel understanding of ethical consumers' SF by exploring new causal mechanisms and introducing new constructs, such as emotive/intuitive mechanisms (the cognitive level), sociological relations (the relational level), and public spheres (the contextual level).

This study contributes to the SF and consumer behavior literature by adopting a socio-psychological approach that considers fashion consumers' cognitive elements resulting in ethical identity expression (RQ1), the symbolic co-construction of consumers' social image

through community relations (RQ2), and the context of SF individual and social dynamics where identity self-verification happens (RQ3). To the author's knowledge, this is one of the first attempts to integrate such cognitive, relational, and contextual dimensions in a multilevel conceptual model. Moreover, the framework adds to current knowledge on how A-B gaps impede SF consumption by affecting the identity-image alignment mechanisms.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Sustainable consumption as a social phenomenon*

Scholars interpret consumption as profoundly embedded in social contexts and human relations (Gummerus *et al.*, 2017; Ozdamar-Ertekin *et al.*, 2020). Consumers are *socially embedded agents* acting according to social rules and institutionalized consumption practices (Cherrier, 2007; Ozdamar-Ertekin and Atik, 2020). Focusing on the socioenvironmental and economic consequences of consumption on contemporary markets, the importance of consumers as active and interconnected social actors<sup>[1]</sup> with ethical responsibilities for industry and society consumption emerges (Solomon, 1983). In this way, ethical consumers become a specific group, close-knit community, and sociocultural movement characterized by solid interconnectedness, shared values of sustainability, and collective identity expression (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). *Sustainable consumption communities* are “groups of individuals who come together to forge new modes of consumption that are ecologically sustainable and socially just” (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis, 2021, p.293). Members of sustainable consumption communities will coalesce around a shared mission with which they can identify and co-create a group identity (Gillani *et al.*, 2021). As interacting agents, ethical consumers' moral identity is “quintessentially social and intrinsically relational” in a specific social space<sup>[2]</sup> (Cherrier, 2007, p.5). Such a *space*, which we refer to as the ‘social reality’ of sustainable consumption (Belk, 1988), comprises social norms, rules, rights, and obligations, resulting in consumers' sustainable behaviors influencing other consumers' intentions (Shaw *et al.*, 2016).

A shared 'group consciousness' emerges as one of the main features of sustainable consumption movements, giving rise to a relational and shared social responsibility among consumers (Shaw *et al.*, 2006). According to Salciuviene *et al.* (2022, p.452), the collective internalization and symbolization of moral identity fosters consumers' sustainable consumption. Such a relational and communal approach to fashion opposes individualistic forms of overconsumption and accumulation characterizing consumerist societies.

The sustainable aspect of consumption requires that the act of purchasing *ethical products* – perceived as socioenvironmental friendly due to sustainable production, manufacturing, and packaging processes (Johnstone and Tan, 2015) – does not 'end' after the purchase, as often happens in hedonic, utilitarian, or conspicuous consumption. Instead, sustainable consumption creates a reciprocal and responsible linkage among all the stakeholders involved in the supply chain. Ethical consumers become social agents who acknowledge significant moral issues and dilemmas, thus acting according to their morality and avoiding damaging consequences for others and society (Zollo *et al.*, 2017). In fact, "Given the collective nature of sustainable products, sustainable behaviors – such as protecting the environment – require group cooperation and are often driven by a desire for social approval" (Schultz *et al.*, 2022, p.3). Due to such a collective responsibility (Barnett *et al.*, 2011), sustainable consumption activists 'vote with their dollars' (Shaw *et al.*, 2006). Ethical consumers opt for individual anti-consumption (or abstention) practices, such as boycotting (or avoiding) unsustainable products, or through collective engagement (Gillani *et al.*, 2021) and political action actively supporting sustainable brands (Carrington *et al.*, 2021). The aim is to influence and persuade other consumers by fostering a sustainability culture within their social group or community (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2016). Purchasing products from sustainable brands allows consumers to express their moral beliefs, values, and personality publicly. In other words, their *ethical self* and resulting *social identity*, which includes "any aspect of self about which individuals can through symbolic means communicate with others, in the instance of dress through

predominantly nondiscursive visual, tactile, and olfactory symbols, however imprecise, and elusive these may be” (Davis, 1992, p.33). As recently stated, “Peer influence is crucial to maintaining ethical consumption as a consistent habit, due to the cultural and social values that these communities instill in their members to encourage greater commitment to ethical values” (Casais and Faria, 2022, p.101).

Ethical consumers feel a high level of social responsibility in individual and relational dimensions (Carrington *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, self-identity expression depends on ethical consumers’ purchase decisions, so what they buy reflects and manifests their inner values, moral identity, personality, and lifestyle as moral actors. On the other hand, ethical consumers’ social image<sup>[3]</sup> impacts others’ purchase choices, thus creating an interactive network of solid interpersonal relations shaped by a sense of belonging (Schultz *et al.*, 2022) – i.e., *consumer citizenship* (Carrington *et al.*, 2021) – and a shared feeling of ‘care’ toward the other members of the same ethical group (Heath *et al.*, 2016). It is noteworthy to distinguish between ethical and responsible consumers as related but slightly different concepts. Ethical consumers prioritize their ethical concerns, beliefs, and ideals when choosing and consuming products (Shaw and Clarke, 1999), thus aiming to express their moral identity and values through sustainable consumption (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis, 2021; Papaioikonomou *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, ethics and moral values are the philosophical basis (Niinimäki, 2010) for ethical consumers’ consumption choices.

Responsible consumers acknowledge the relevance and consequences of their consumption choices, thus feeling responsible toward society and the environment (Carrigan *et al.*, 2011). Responsible consumers aim to safeguard the sustainability of their communities and the planet, thus prioritizing the need to help, support, and advocate responsible and sustainable companies (Zollo *et al.*, 2018). As a result, ethical consumers need responsible decisions and actions to express their inner identity and personality, in other words, their ‘ethical self.’ As Carrington *et al.* (2010, p.140) seminally stated, “Ethically minded consumers feel a



*responsibility* towards the environment and to society and seek to express their values through ethical consumption and purchasing (or boycotting) behavior” (*Latin* added).

Table 1 synthesizes the most relevant constructs in the SF literature and stresses the related existing gaps.

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### *Ethical consumers’ A-B gaps*

We **must thoroughly** understand why ethical consumers’ *words* are rarely followed by concrete *deeds* (Carrington *et al.*, 2010; Hassan *et al.*, 2016) despite social movements and ethical consumption communities’ incentives to translate beliefs into actions thanks to peer-based reference groups. The *30:3 phenomenon* – one-tenth of ethical consumers buying sustainable products – still exists (Govind *et al.*, 2019; Shaw *et al.*, 2016). Scholars found some consensus regarding the ‘disablers’ (i.e., barriers and obstacles) favoring ethical consumers’ A-B gap (Carranza *et al.*, 2023). A primary reason is the price of sustainable products, which are usually more expensive than conventional ones (Bray *et al.*, 2011). A consumer reported, “Price is the biggest factor when choosing a product and green products are usually more expensive” (Gleim *et al.*, 2013, p.48). Because many conventional products exist as alternatives to sustainable ones, ethical consumers must balance the moral cause they are pursuing and the sacrifice to pay a higher price. So, consumers must make functional compromises and financial sacrifices to align their green rhetoric with purchasing behavior (Johnstone and Tan, 2015).

A second reason is the perceived quality of sustainable products, which seems inferior to conventional products: “The green products that I have purchased do not have the same quality as their counterparts” (Gleim *et al.*, 2013, p.48). **Although aesthetics is a crucial factor influencing consumers’ appeal to SF products, their perceived lower quality remains a critical**

barrier to SF consumption (Ozdamar-Ertekin and Atik, 2015, p.63). Brands should communicate the quality of their products to make consumers aware of the high manufacturing standards, avoiding the common belief that sustainable products are made of poorer quality than their conventional counterparts. A third reason refers to low levels of consumer trust: “I would not purchase green products because the majority of companies just slap a label on so they can charge more to the customer without truly making a difference in the environment” (Gleim *et al.*, 2013, p.48). Such a reason relates to perceived greenwashing, which is negatively associated with green trust and fosters green consumers’ confusion and perceived green risk (Carranza *et al.*, 2023).

Regarding second-hand and collaborative consumption, Edbring *et al.* (2016) found several obstacles perceived by consumers. The most cited were, first, a *concern for hygiene* (“Since people might not share the same standards of hygiene, it feels disgusting and complicated!”, p.12). Next, the *lack of trust* and *product attachment* (“I would never lend to someone I did not trust,” or “I would have needed some type of trust to the person first,” p.12). Finally, the *desire for new products* (“I want to have something of my own and new,” p.9). Consumers’ desire for new products is particularly relevant once applied to fashion. As Atik and Ozdamar-Ertekin (2023) argue, acquiring new fashion products helps consumers accommodate their desire for newness, which, in turn, allows “consumers’ search for constructing new images of self to represent” (p.3). Hence, consumers’ restless desire for the new is still a critical barrier against SF consumption (Atik, 2007).

Other obstacles to sustainable consumption exist, such as lack of choice, options, availability, information, spatial and temporal convenience, or consumers’ cynicism (Hassan *et al.*, 2016; Johnstone and Tan, 2015). As a result, consumers’ decision to purchase sustainable products represents a *social dilemma*, meaning a situation where social actors choose to act in self-interest or cooperate with others to maximize their group’s collective gain (Solomon, 1983). Such a dilemma is influenced by reference/peer group effects (i.e., in-

group identity and expectation of others' cooperation) and driven by the incentive to increase collective rather than individual socioeconomic advantage (Schultz *et al.*, 2022). These issues are particularly significant in fashion consumption (Niinimäki, 2010), where the A-B gap is highly present (Govind *et al.*, 2019).

### *The A-B gap in SF*

The fashion industry is one of the sectors deeply concerned with companies' socioenvironmental impact and consumers' A-B gaps. *SF consumers* are "concerned with the effects on the external world around them when they buy, use, and dispose of fashion products" (Jung *et al.*, 2016, p.485). Thanks to the 'logic of sustainability' (Ozdamar Ertekin *et al.*, 2020) and a new 'culture' of fashion (Atik *et al.*, 2022), different fashion paradigms are emerging, giving rise to alternatives to the overconsumption of clothes and fast fashion practices. These changing paradigms stress consumers' (a) societal and environmental awareness of their economic decisions, (b) emphasis on sustainable materials, (c) respect for craftsmanship and authenticity, and (d) active involvement with the production process (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik, 2015; 2020). Examples are the Slow Fashion Movement, the Collaborative Fashion Consumption model, and the Circular Fashion Economy (Edbring *et al.*, 2016; Niinimäki, 2017). An important distinction can initially be made between the notions of 'ethical' and 'sustainable' related to fashion. Ethical fashion refers to the value-based system implemented in the industry and by companies that guide their decisions and behavior (Niinimäki, 2015, p.2). Prioritizing values such as equality, freedom, democracy, environmentalism, beliefs on good/bad conduct, right/wrong practices, and the resulting consequences on people, society, and the economy creates the basis for fashion managers' ethical decision-making and, in turn, an attitude toward moral behavior. Thus, ethical fashion becomes a necessary condition – a 'preparatory consideration' – for practically implementing SF. For example, fashion companies' sustainable use of resources, environmental protection,

and positive human development embody the notion of SF (Niinimäki, 2017). In this sense, SF might be interpreted as fashion companies' moral behavior based on ethical principles, moral beliefs, and values.

SF consumers increasingly share their clothes and possessions through community-based services aligned with 'collaborative consumption,' which stresses the shift from *you are what you own* toward *you are what you share* (Belk, 2007). However, ethical communities must better educate consumers on their socioenvironmental responsibilities and how to become moral agents by "sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping" fashion clothes (Botsman and Rogers, 2011, p.XV). A critical issue remains unanswered: Why do SF consumers fail to align their moral identity with purchase decisions and consumption behavior?

The starting point to untangle the fashion-sustainability oxymoron (Carranza *et al.*, 2023) is a better comprehension of the ethical microfoundations of fashion consumption, especially from the buyer's perspective (i.e., the consumer ethics approach). According to Niinimäki (2010), "fashion consumption converge(s) strongly with construction of self and one's own individuality, in order to express deeply one's own personality, such as ethical values and aesthetic preference" (p.153). Niinimäki (2010; 2017) interprets fashion as a symbolic vehicle, a bridge through which ethical consumers manifest cultural meanings, social appearance, and public interaction. Such collective self-construction describes how fashion consumers express their self-identity and represent their social image, thus aspiring to live a desired lifestyle publicly (Atik and Firat, 2013). Belk (1988) seminally theorized consumers' possessions as their *extended self*, a 'second skin,' allowing them to express their self-identity. Once applied to fashion consumption, consumers interpret fashion products as 'self-objects' becoming an integral part of themselves: "Possessions can also symbolically extend self" (Belk, 1988, p.145). As reported by a young ethical fashion consumer: "Fashion, I think it's a way to express who you are as a person, 'cause when you look at someone, the first thing you

see is what they're wearing, so it's kind of how you present yourself and how, I guess, you want people to think about your personality or where you fit within society” (McNeill and Venter, 2019).

Accordingly, Lundblad and Davies (2016, p.153) found that SF is mainly driven by values and motivations underpinning consumers’ consumption, such as expression of self, self-esteem, responsibility, protecting the planet, a sense of accomplishment, and social justice. SF consumers buy products to pursue, express, declare, and ascertain their sense of being sustainable through what they choose, possess, and consume. Hence, a *self-brand connection* arises when consumers “form meaningful and personal connections between themselves and a given brand such that the brand itself is somehow closely associated with the individual's self-concept” (Moore and Homer, 2008, p.707). Aligned with this, Niinimäki (2010) claims that SF consumers add ideological value to self-objects that reflect consumers’ inner values, needs, and identities. Such ideological and cultural symbols (Han *et al.*, 2016) are shared within sustainable consumption communities because consumers exist as individuals and mainly as “collectivities” (Belk, 1988, p.152). Mukendi *et al.* (2020, p.2888) state, “consumer communities educate, advise and teach each other, providing tips and tricks to implementing SF behaviours and avoiding unsustainable practices.” A way to strengthen group membership and belonging is through *shared consumption symbols* (Belk, 1988; 2013). Hence, 1) ethical consumers ascribe meanings to fashion products and purchase them to express and publicly represent their role in social reality (Solomon, 1983); 2) these meanings represent cultural symbols resulting from social interactions between members of the same community (Han *et al.*, 2016); and 3) symbolic meanings are formed through interpretive processes through which consumers create self-identities and social images based on the receptions and feedback of other interacting members (Zollo, 2021). The result is a community level of the ethical self (Belk, 1988), which is responsibly shared within the social group and nurtured by other members’ behavior, thus creating a dynamic virtuous loop of collective sustainable

consumption (Schultz *et al.*, 2022). This phenomenon represents a *group effect*: shared meanings and values strongly influence members' sustainable consumption practices (Shaw *et al.*, 2006).

#### *From consumers' self-identity to social image*

We interpret fashion consumption as ethical consumers' decisions of not only *what to do* or *how to act* but especially *who to be* (Davis, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Self-identity thus reflects the way fashion consumers perceive themselves (i.e., individual self-perception) and implies the choice of brands they consider appropriate for representing their social image (social self-perception or social identity). Similarly, ethical consumers experience SF at two different but interrelated levels: an individual level (i.e., self-identity expression) and a sociorelational level (i.e., social image representation) (Niinimäki, 2010). Scholars agree that consumers might have three forms of self-representation or identity orientations (Han *et al.*, 2016): individualistic, relational, or collectivistic. Conventional fashion consumption (i.e., fast fashion) might derive from individualistic self-interested identity orientation, such as purchasing a dress because of its functional features. Instead, SF consumption derives from relational (i.e., others' benefit) and collectivistic (i.e., societal welfare) rationales (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020).

The coherence experienced at a psychological (inner) and sociological (outer) level between ethical consumers' identity and social image is essential in SF consumption. Fashion consumers define their identity through the 'congruity' between 1) self-identity, 2) social image, and 3) product image (Sirgy, 1982). Self-identity refers to self-perception, e.g., "I think of myself as a 'green consumer'" (Sparks and Shepherd, 1992, p.392). Ethical consumers purchase fashion products that reflect their moral self-identity. The social image has been defined in terms of its two subdimensions: the social self-concept, which is the image a consumer believes others hold on them, and the ideal self-concept, which is the

desired image a consumer would like others to hold (Sirgy, 1982, p.288). Ethical consumers seek the most balance between their self-identity and social image during consumption by preferring ‘congruent’ fashion brands. Finally, the product image becomes a symbolic means by which consumers might express and represent themselves as ethical/social actors and members of a specific community. This process relates to the ethical consumer “identification” with the fashion product and brand (Sirgy, 1982). As a result, consumers with a solid ethical self-identity (i.e., perceiving themselves as ethical consumers) will be more willing to purchase SF products because these will meet their self-definition needs and social image representation: “My dress is me. It (clothing) fits my character” (Niinimäki, 2010, p.155).

The A-B gap might arise if some linkage across such a mechanism is incongruent with the initial consumer’s identity expression goals (Johnstone and Tan, 2015). Such an incongruence results from the signaling effect that others’ perceptions and evaluation (i.e., social image) have on a consumer’s self-perception (i.e., identity). The referral consensus is crucial in turning ethical attitudes and intentions into actual behavior (Carrington *et al.*, 2010; Casais and Faria, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2016). Consumers translate fashion possessions’ features and attributes into their social image. Thus, the consumer’s self-identity will align (or not) with how others perceive them depending on such a congruity. Social image must support and reinforce ethical consumers’ self-identity to decrease the A-B gap and achieve self-congruity: “Individuals compose their self-identity according to how they believe they appear to others” (Zollo, 2021, p.305). An ethical consumer (labeled A) might self-express their identity through fashion consumption. This act will impact another social actor’s identity self-construction (labeled B), publicly reflecting consumer A’s social image. Depending on consumer B’s impressions, the community to which consumer A belongs might positively or negatively acknowledge ethical identity-image alignment. As a result, consumer A will ‘self-verify’ identity-image alignment (i.e., congruity) to assess whether her/his original ethical attitude is consistently maintained during consumption behavior (Reed II *et al.*, 2012). Self-

verification has been seminally defined by Swann (1983) as the process enabling people to create in their minds (i.e., cognitive dimension) and social environments (i.e., relational dimension) a “social reality that verifies and confirms their self-conceptions” (p.33). A ‘positive’ self-verification (i.e., being seen by others in the way we see ourselves) allows the stability of self-conception (Swann, 1997). Such a balance motivates consumers to stay true to their ethical identity and social image through commitment and engagement (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001) toward fashion brands that represent who they are.

### **Theoretical Framework and Propositions**

We present a framework (Figure 1) that integrates social intuitionism (Haidt, 2001), social representation theory (Moscovici, 1981), and Habermas’ (1962/1991) PS to unpack the micromechanisms describing SF consumption from a consumer-based perspective. The framework is descriptive because it proposes (and does not prescribe) how ethical consumers experience SF through three major dynamics: 1) self-identity expression at the individual level (RQ1, the *cognitive* component); 2) social image representation in public (RQ2, the *relational* component); and 3) the PS as the context where consumers manifest SF consumption and self-verify their ethical identity-image (mis)alignment (RQ3, the *contextual* component).

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The framework presents a multi-level theorization following the guidelines provided by Makadok *et al.* (2018), who conceptualized six levers of the “theorizing process” (p.1532). These levers guide how to make theoretical contributions to a particular research stream, in our case, ethical consumption. Specifically, Lever 1 refers to the mode of theorizing (*How?*), such as shifting from static to dynamic models – i.e., moving beyond the linear attitude-behavior gap model by exploring the dynamic feedback loops happening after consumers’



non-ethical behavior and leading back to their attitudes. Lever 2 (*Where?*) refers to applying an existing theory to a different phenomenon, such as Habermas' PS to the ethical consumption realm. Lever 3 concerns the new causal mechanisms (*Why?*) introduced by the research; for example, theorizing how ethical consumers' self-identity expression leads to their social representation. Lever 4 involves the introduction of constructs or variables (*What?*) to unpack the underlying mechanisms of previously validated relationships through new antecedents, mediators/moderators, and outcomes. Once applied to our context, understanding the microsociological dynamics between consumers' ethical commitment and engagement. Lever 5 refers to broadening a theory's assumptions for further applications (*When?*), such as expanding the socio-intuitionism model (Haidt, 2001) to consumers' ethical decision-making process (Zollo, 2021). Finally, Lever 6 suggests deriving new outputs by combining different theories (*Predictions*). In our case, a better understanding of ethical consumers' A-B gaps micro and relational mechanisms by integrating socio-intuitionism (Haidt, 2001), social representation theory (Moscovici, 1981), and the PS model (Habermas, 1962/1991).

### *The cognitive component*

The first component of the framework illustrates how fashion consumers express their self-identity as ethically committed actors toward a sustainable brand (see Figure 2).

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Consistent with business ethics scholars adopting Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model for ethical decision-making (Zollo, 2021; Zollo *et al.*, 2017), we focus on moral judgment in sustainable consumption to present how fashion consumers express their ethical identity at the individual (inner, cognitive) level. According to Haidt (2001), decision-makers' *moral intuition* is "the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an

affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike), without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (p. 818). One of the main contributions of Haidt’s model is that moral intuition plays a prime role in consumers’ ethical decision-making, being responsible for the *a priori* emotive/intuitive judgments impacting their *post hoc* deliberative reasoning. Scholars associate moral intuition with consumers’ *System 1*, “an experiential and unconscious system of innate, rapid, parallel, automatic, instinctive behaviors, and information processing” (Zollo, 2021, p.300). Moral reasoning, instead, represents *System 2*, the cognitive process described as “slow, controlled, logical, and sequential in nature, thus resulting in the human powerful general purpose reasoning system” (Zollo *et al.*, 2017, p.685).

The consumer ethics literature has traditionally taken a rationalist perspective to emphasize the role of consumers’ moral reasoning (System 2) (Hassan *et al.*, 2022). Rationalist scholars follow Rest’s (1986) four-stage model of *moral awareness* (i.e., recognition of a moral dilemma), *moral judgment* (i.e., deliberated judgment about moral correctness), *moral intent* (i.e., choice of an ethical behavior following one’s values and principles), and *moral behavior* (i.e., actual ethical conduct). This stream of research necessitates a paradigmatic shift focusing on the nonrational elements of consumers’ cognition (System 1). There is a need to explore the emotional side of ethical decision-making (Vitell *et al.*, 2013), focusing on moral emotions linked to other persons’ interests and society’s welfare, such as empathy, gratitude, elevation, and moral pride (Zollo, 2021). Personal values play a crucial role in intuitive decision-making processes as ‘deep-seated’ and ‘invisible’ enduring beliefs manifest in consumers’ attitudes and preferences for moral judgments and behavior (Cherry and Caldwell, 2013). Such an inner moral sense represents “an intuitive or directly felt belief about how one ought to act, listing among these moral senses sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty” (Cherry and Caldwell, 2013, p.118). Consistently, *caring* for people, society, and the environment has a nonrational, affective component that leads ethical consumers to

emotionally share how others might feel after a decision or behavior (Heath *et al.*, 2016). This perspective interprets sustainable behavior as made by interconnected ‘caring consumers’ (Heath *et al.*, 2016) that become relational and affect-laden social actors in the communities they belong to instead of independent and purely rational individuals (Hassan *et al.*, 2022).

As shown in Figure 2, ethical consumers’ *individual representation* starts from a nonconscious cognitive process (*moral intuition* in System 1) that produces judgments based on a moral sense, which will be afterward rationalized by their *moral reasoning* (in System 2) process (Haidt, 2001). As a result, the cognitive component of our framework relates to consumers’ ethical identity expression through fashion consumption, describing their *individual representation* – as opposed to their *social representation* discussed later – as SF consumers. Cognition scientists state that human personality involves the constant presence of two main elements, the ‘I’ and the ‘Me,’ which contribute to defining one’s ‘self’ (James, 1950; Woźniak, 2018). Consumers’ moral reasoning reflects their ‘Me’ as “the totality of all content of consciousness that is experienced as self-related” (Woźniak, 2018, p.3). Moral reasoning ends with the concrete act of “moral behavior,” which represents the fourth stage of Rest’s (1986) model (Figure 2). All the related experiences felt and perceived by ethical consumers when purchasing and consuming fashion products, from visual to auditory and tactile, shape their *self*, which is interpreted as the ‘Me’ (James, 1950; Woźniak, 2018). According to James (1950), these experiences and the resulting thoughts are *objects* in consumers’ consciousness, so the ‘Me’ is interpreted as the ‘self-as-object.’

When a consumer purchases a SF product, s/he will objectify such an experience as themselves (“Me”), finalizing the sustainable consumption act. A fashion consumer experienced her desire to stand through self-identity: “because shopping at [thrift] shops and second-hand stores encourages a certain type of creativity, and a personal self-expression that you can't get only from shopping at certain stores” (McNeill and Venter, 2019, p.375). Fashion allows consumers to distinguish themselves and their moral actions from others’ actions to express

their self-identity and personality (i.e., *selfhood*). The notions of ‘Me’ and ‘self-as-object’ usually reflect one’s extended self, consistent with Belk’s (1988) extended-self theory of possessions, such as fashion products, which represent *self-associated objects* incorporated into one’s identity and personality (Belk, 2014). In this way, the SF product I wear is ‘mine,’ belongs to ‘Me,’ and becomes an *extension* of my identity (i.e., a self-object), different from the other conventional fashion products I intentionally decided not to buy (Belk, 1988; 2013).

Instead, the ‘I’ element represents the subjectivity of consumers, the ‘self-as-subject’ (James, 1950; Woźniak, 2018). As a higher-order component of human cognition, it reflects the consumer’s subjectivity, the ‘I’ that automatically inclined them toward sustainable decisions, purchases, and consumption. All the *objectified* thoughts and feelings constituting the sustainable consumption experience of ‘Me’ underlie the consumer’s ‘I,’ which is always present even if consumers don’t accomplish the final decision or behavior. The ‘I’ of consumers, both unconsciously (System 1) and consciously (System 2), represent their innate emotions, intuitions, values, and beliefs (Figure 2). Niinimäki (2010) applied this model to fashion consumption to better investigate consumers’ ongoing construction of self and identity, stating, “The consumer undergoes a silent dialogue between the ‘I’ and the ‘me.’ The ‘I’ discovers, feels, and interprets the garment as it occurs, subjectively. ‘Me’ evaluates the style option as the implications for the self and thinks about how others may respond to the new look. ‘I’ is the creative side, ‘me’ is evaluating and judging, and together they comprise the self” (p.154).

The primary outcome of the first cognitive component of the framework (see Figure 2) is fashion consumers’ *ethical commitment*, defined as “an emotional or psychological attachment to a company...or a brand” (Ingram *et al.*, 2005, p.238). Ethical commitment reveals fashion consumers’ emotional attachment and loyalty to a specific sustainable brand that reflects their self-identity (Niinimäki, 2010). As a result, SF allows consumers to realize and reveal their *care* for others, the environment, and society (Heath *et al.*, 2016). An

ethically committed consumer will purchase and consume SF products to represent their self-identity, thus supporting (or avoiding) ethical (non-sustainable) brands that reflect (or do not reflect) their personality (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001).

As shown in Figure 2 (the ‘broken link’ symbol), SF consumers should consider potential deviations in the rational reasoning process. Such rational deviations might incline to consumers’ ethical blindness, “the temporary inability to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake” (Palazzo *et al.*, 2011, p.324). Once ‘ethically blinded,’ consumers might prefer utilitarian and consequential logic (i.e., price or spatial convenience considerations), causing moral intuition and rational decision misalignments.

We formulate the following theoretical proposition (see RQ1):

**Proposition 1:** *Consumers’ moral intuition leads to ethical identity expression by choosing self-associated fashion brands. Moral reasoning allows a rational commitment to consume fashion products, extending consumers’ self. A ‘broken link’ might occur due to excessive reliance on consequential logic, causing misalignments between intuitive and deliberative decision-making.*

#### *The relational component*

The second component of the framework refers to the relational aspect of SF consumption (see Figure 3).

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Insert Figure 3 Here  
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We interpret ethical consumers as interdependent members of communities representing their social image in public (Cherrier, 2007; Hoelscher and Chatzidakis, 2021; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw *et al.*, 2016). SF communities are means of identity construction (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020) and serve as “a formalized group of consumers that collectively construct moral frameworks of reference” (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2016, p.226). The

adherence to these frameworks lets consumers become *ethically engaged* in the community's moral cause, such as sustainability concerns and environmental values embodied in 'slow fashion' movements and culture (Mukendi *et al.*, 2020). Ethical engagement is possible thanks to peer and reference social influence, comparison, and approval (Casais and Faria, 2022). Because ethical consumers share their extended self with other consumers (Belk, 1988), a group's collective identity, relational responsibility, and shared consciousness might be nurtured and maintained long-term. So, the boundaries between a consumer's ethical self and community become increasingly blurred. The extended self turns into a *broader self* that "incorporates" the sustainable consumption behaviors within the community (Belk, 1988, p.154). Peers from the same community define collective meanings and cultural symbols (Han *et al.*, 2016) that strongly influence consumers' moral judgment and ethical behavior. An example of such a *collective duty of care* refers to the iconic "plastic bag-free" town of Modbury (Carrigan *et al.*, 2011, p.525). Thanks to consumer citizenship (Carrington *et al.*, 2021), Modbury's citizens, traders, and companies still nowadays share the decision to use only biodegradable bags. Engaged citizens avoid selling and purchasing conventional plastic bags, thus showing an emblematic case of social influence and collective persuasion toward SF consumption.

Ethical consumers should find an alignment between their expressed ethical identity (i.e., the outcome in Figure 2) and their represented social image, resulting from community members' impressions of their behavior (Casais and Faria, 2022). The transition from ethical consumers' self-identity to social image (the Social Representation link in Figure 1) happens within the community, where members ascribe symbolic meanings to others' behaviors, thus publicly defining members' social image (Cherrier, 2007; Niinimäki, 2010). According to Papaoikonomou *et al.* (2016, p.225), "These meanings are constructed and negotiated within the subjectively formed in-group. Thus, the identity construction process is itself dynamic and renegotiated". Ethical consumers represent their social image *verbally* through narratives and

*behaviorally* through consumption practices, giving rise to ‘collective ethical spaces’<sup>[4]</sup> of social image co-construction (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2016).

Our framework interprets ethical consumers’ self-identity expression as a dynamic process that continuously leads to self-verification based on the collective legitimization of one’s social image (Reed II *et al.*, 2012). In this way, the ethical identity expressed during the first stage (Figure 2) is tested against the social representation stage (Figure 3). Consumers evaluate the (mis)alignment between their ethical identity and social image thanks to in-group social comparison. In the case of alignment, ethical consumers form a coherent social image, decreasing the risk of A-B gaps. As shown in Figure 3 (the ‘broken link’ symbol), SF consumers should be aware of their social image acceptance by the community to avoid misalignments between ethical identity and social image. The *internalized* ethical identity is then *externalized* through consumers’ expression (verbally and behaviorally) of their sustainable consumption practices toward other interacting community members (Zollo, 2021). Identity expression happens thanks to in-group social representation, which is the outcome of the discursive co-construction of members’ identity, resulting in an intersubjective collective experience (Jovchelovitch, 1995; Moscovici, 1981). SF consumers become moral actors willing to express their identity to the social reality they belong to. Jovchelovitch’s (1995, p.85) question, “For who am I but the self the others present to me?” clearly stresses a sense of ‘we’ in ethical identity and social image construction, communication, and renegotiation within communities. As shown in Figure 3, SF consumers’ ‘we’ is the primary outcome of the relational component in our framework. Fashion consumption becomes a symbolic bridge allowing ethical consumers to access “something meaningful” (Niinimäki, 2010, p.153), a way to externally manifest their inner identity and personality (i.e., through SF products) by achieving acceptance and approval within a community. As one SF consumer reports, social identification assumes a relevant role: “I like being part of a group of like-minded people” (McNeill and Venter, 2019, p.376).

The theoretical perspective for this second component is *social representation*, seminally defined as “the elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (Moscovici, 1963, p.251). SF becomes a *social object* – which ‘exists’ in the social reality of consumption communities – when its verbal and behavioral expressions (i.e., manifestations) are co-constructed by in-group social actors. A fashion product becomes a social object when acknowledged by community members, whose thoughts and feelings will associate such an ‘entity’ with the member wearing/consuming it (Wagner *et al.*, 1999). According to Wagner *et al.* (1999), the first step of social representation is ‘anchoring’ (or ‘conventionalization’), which describes how a new social object – such as sustainable consumption practices – might be introduced into a social group to become familiar and shared between members with similar ideas and meaning systems (see Figure 3). For example, when sustainable consumption communities introduced the notion of *fashion circular economy* (Niinimäki, 2017), consumers naturally found it unfamiliar at first. Members needed to interpret and socially represent fashion circular economy in recognizable terms and symbols, such as recycling, sharing, and reusing existing materials to avoid overproduction in favor of sustainability. Suppose a consumer wants to express their ethical self-identity to the group to which s/he belongs. In that case, public discourse and social communication must be collectively understood and diffused within the group through conventional symbols and familiar ‘schemata’ (Wagner *et al.*, 1999). In the circular fashion economy example, the consumer must first realize the adherence between their ethical identity and the related “anchors” – conventional symbols publicly understood by the community’s members.

The second step is ‘objectification,’ which refers to how social group members develop their symbolical interpretations of the new, unfamiliar social object. The new socially represented knowledge instigated by the social object will be collectively constructed through icons or metaphors to reproduce its *image structure* intelligibly for the group’s common sense



(Wagner *et al.*, 1999, p.99). Consequently, ethical consumer's social image might be publicly co-constructed within a group. Taking the example of the fashion circular economy, Niinimäki (2017) states that "Composting is not a realistic option for garments and textiles, which include many harmful chemicals, and further composting causes methane, which contributes to greater greenhouse gas emissions and global warming" (p.151). SF consumers apprehend what the circular economy deals with, such as climate change due to global warming, and does not, such as composting practices due to fashion production and technical cycles. Once a group majority ascribes the inner meanings of a new social object's representation, its understanding and communication are socially acknowledged and publicly accepted. In this way, ethical consumers know how to express self-identity and represent their social image, which should be aligned and adherent to such symbols to be objectified by group members. As a result, ethical consumers' social image directly results from collective representations of their identity shared within a social group (Wagner *et al.*, 1999).

The alignment between consumers' social identity and the "community level of self" (Belk, 1988, p.153) positively influences members' ethical attitudes and intentions (Joshi and Raman, 2015). As a result, fashion consumers' *ethical engagement* is achieved (Figure 3), which "permits consumers to demonstrate a feeling of responsibility toward society and their admiration of businesses employing socially responsible approaches, as expressed by purchasing products which have positive, moral, and ethical qualities" (Gillani *et al.*, 2021, p.561).

We propose the following (see RQ2):

**Proposition 2:** *Ethical consumers represent their social image through verbal and behavioral symbols adherent to reference groups. The resulting public acknowledgment fosters consumers' engagement toward SF consumption. A 'broken link' might occur due to group members' perception of inconsistencies between consumers' expressed self-identity and their social image.*

### *The contextual component*

One question remains: What is the social space where SF consumers' self-identity and social image are expressed and represented? To this end, we focus on the *context* and *public realm*, interpreted as the social reality (Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1983), where SF consumption occurs (see Figure 4).

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Insert Figure 4 Here  
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We do so by building on the PS notion, defined by Habermas (1962/1991) as the open, shared, and discursive space where interacting social actors communicate their cultural ideals and common concerns. Such interaction and communication are done publicly, freely, and equally, thus aiming at a shared collective consensus in public opinion (Jovchelovitch, 1995). As an interactive and communicative network, the PS is 'public' because interested social actors might freely and actively join in and dynamically interact with other members. Media devices such as newspapers, social media, or public events mediate such participation and interaction. According to Habermas, a social space needs some requirements to be considered a PS. Following the example of SF communities, 1) a consumer might debate with other members in an open and accessible way; 2) shared discourses must address topics of the community's common concern because private interests are not relevant (groups' owners set specific rules to be respected); 3) disparities and discriminations of social status are avoided; and 4) all members are one-is-worth-one peers in intersubjective expression and collective representation aimed at reaching a social consensus toward communal goals and mission. The PS becomes the social context where ethical consumers might express their self-identity and represent their social image. Thanks to fashion products, ethical consumers externalize meanings, ideals, values, and cultural symbols that manifest who they are to a "communicative public" (Valtysson, 2012, p.79). Because fashion is the symbolic vehicle to

express consumers' ethical identity (Niinimäki, 2010), the PS represents the relational context where other social actors receive, interpret, and evaluate the resulting social image. A notion that plays a relevant role in the relational context is identity self-verification (Swann, 1983; 1997). Once applied to consumer behavior, we interpret PS<sup>[5]</sup> as the space where ethical consumers self-verify identity-image congruity: "Feedback from the external environment will be introspectively processed to determine progress toward the ideal representation of an identity" (Reed II *et al.*, 2012, p.317).

A new version of the PS emerged in our contemporary society, whose communicative spaces are mainly digitalized and technology-based (Schäfer, 2015). PS has been translated into virtual and digital landscapes (i.e., the 'Digital Public Sphere') as an accessible, fast, free, and interactive platform where access to information is open to an endless audience of interested people allowed to dialog, participate, and collaborate on online platforms (Valtysson, 2012). Online communities such as Facebook's fair-trade groups (Valtysson, 2012) commit consumers to consistently persist in sustainable consumption thanks to perceived informational, social, and entertainment benefits (Gummerus *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, ethical consumers' active participation in PSs plays a crucial role in their identity-image alignment, thus attenuating the A-B gap. As shown in Figure 4 (the 'broken link' symbol), the A-B gap self-verification in PSs represents the ultimate test SF consumers should do to assess the congruity between their self-identity and social image. Accordingly, Belk (2013) stated: "We now self-disclose and confess online, transforming the once semi-private to a more public presentation of self. This is also evident in the more shared nature of the self, which is now co-constructed" (p.490). Fashion consumers' (digital) self is thus shared and collectively co-constructed with others.

Examples of SF communities on social media (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.) with thousands of active members are arising<sup>[6]</sup>. These digital PSs allow SF consumers and brands to generate user-to-user (i.e., UGC) and firm-to-user (i.e., FGC)

communication and publicly express their opinions, thus achieving social acceptance and consensus online. As shown in Figure 4, the PS is the interactive discursive space (step “1”) where SF consumers interact with other social actors, forming an interconnected and interdependent virtual community of ‘shared relational responsibility’ (step “2”) (Shlaile *et al.*, 2018). Online SF communities are a clear example of how group members and peers share their consumption experiences, aiming at collectively expressing their self-identity and verifying the resulting social image (step “3”). Initially, consumers are actively *engaged* in posting their photos and videos – interpreted as visual images and memories of self (Moore and Homer, 2008) – on fashion consumption to manifest their ethical ‘digital self’ (Belk, 2013). Consequently, members react to express opinions, beliefs, and related experiences about these practices, thus co-creating a shared *commitment* in the community. Jovchelovitch (1995) states that “the public sphere, as a space of intersubjective reality, is constitutive of social representations, in that it provides the ground for their emergence” (p.81). SF consumption becomes an ‘experience of plurality’ (Cherrier, 2007; Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2016; Schultz *et al.*, 2022). It happens in the PS as an open, free, relational, interactive, and discursive space where community members externalize their ethical self-identity. Once consumers attain a shared consensus, public identity is formed and collectively objectified in the PS, resulting in consumers’ social image.

These features are standard in the contemporary “digitalized” version of PSs. As Belk (2013, p.479) notes, the first element refers to the *dematerialization* of digital reality that allows consumers to access public and discursive spaces easily and instantly, thus sharing UGC with thousands of group peers sharing common interests. Fashion consumers can now express their ethical identity in the PS, allowing large communities to externalize their ‘digital extended self socially’ (Belk, 2013). As a result, the notion of OSI – the social image in online environments – has been defined as “self-concepts that result through identification with social groups or categories that individuals experience online” (Pegg *et al.*, 2018, p.51). As

shown in Figure 4, ethically committed fashion consumers express their OSI (step “3”) and verify the alignment between their ethical self-identity and social image (step “4”) by seeking external validation within group/community peers (Reed II *et al.*, 2012; Schultz *et al.*, 2022). Such identity-image alignments will turn fashion consumers into ethically engaged actors within the online community’s vision and mission.

A second element is *sharing* UGC in collective ethical spaces. Consumers might like, comment on, or share their fashion consumption practices in online communities. Social media become a digital platform where consumers *present* (i.e., publish, post) themselves to their reference group (Cavusoglu and Atik, 2021; Kautish and Khare, 2022).

A third element is the *co-construction* of ethical consumers’ social image in digital environments. Consumers seek public affirmation through positive feedback and interaction with other peers when posting their digital selves online and manifesting their OSI (Pegg *et al.*, 2018). Such a participatory aspect of the PS allows the co-construction of a collaborative, aggregate extended self. In digital realms, “Boundaries between self and other representations become more diffuse, and thinking becomes more subjective” (Belk, 2013, p.488). The public’s participation in the PS is crucial for the “discursive formation” of a consumer’s identity and social image (Valtysson, 2012, p.79).

A fourth element refers to *distributed memory* (Belk, 2013), which allows consumers to trace their past social behavior (i.e., autobiographical memories; Moore and Homer, 2008) and others’ UGC on a member’s opinion or behavior. Distributed memory is fundamental in consumers’ self-verification of their ethical identity-image fit (Link 3 in Figure 1). As Giddens (1991, p.54) notes, self-identity is supported by “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.” Thanks to digital PSs, consumers can immediately access, trace, evaluate, and refine their OSI. Hence, consumers can always compare individual memory with collective memory stored in communities’ past stories. As a result, distributed memory might

become a source of information about the historical evolution of an ethical movement/group's cultural and generational identity (Belk, 2013).

As illustrated in Figure 4, the PS allows fashion consumers to self-verify their A-B gap in ethical consumption (step "5"). To exemplify, a SF consumer stated, "I would probably participate more for the community, or more for the people rather than the clothes themselves" (McNeill and Venter, 2019, p.376). Consumers should constantly monitor their 'online identity kit' in the PS to co-create part of their aggregate extended self (Belk, 2013). Following such an identity-association principle (Reed *et al.*, 2012), consumers might self-verify identity-image alignment or A-B gaps.

Based on the above, we propose the following (see RQ3):

**Proposition 3:** *PSs represent the interactive and communicative space where ethical consumers voice their commitment and share their relational responsibility toward SF consumption. PSs mirror the congruity between ethical consumers' identity and social image. Broken links might happen if self-verification implies ethical consumers rethink their SF practices.*

## **Discussion**

The proposed framework of SF contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we explore ethical consumers' cognitive, relational, and contextual mechanisms to show how misalignments between self-identity and social image might occur in SF consumption. Thus, we theoretically address the A-B gap by focusing on the underlying linkages between consumers' self-identity expression and their social image representation in public. Next, we used a multidisciplinary approach to build the framework on social intuitionism (Haidt, 2001), social representation theory (Moscovici, 1981), and the PS (Habermas, 1962/1991). Thus, the model conceptualizes how ethical consumers' identity turns into social images through SF. Finally, we applied the Habermasian theory of PS to fashion consumption. In this way, the PS

is used to unpack the ethical aspects of fashion consumption in public environments, either offline or online. This promising area has received scant attention from consumer ethics scholars.

### *Theoretical implications*

Our framework's first theoretical contribution is to explore the micro-dynamics (*Levers 1 and 5* of Makadok *et al.*, 2018) of ethical consumers' self-identity formation and expression. We adopt a social intuitionist approach (Haidt, 2001) to stress how non-rational mechanisms of ethical consumers – such as moral emotions and intuition – lead to *individual representation* to express ethical identity. This results in ethical commitment (Ingram *et al.*, 2005) toward fashion brands extending consumers' self. We enrich the consumer ethics stream by stressing moral intuition's unconscious, intuitive, and emotive elements as a counterpart of rational and deliberative elements in fashion consumption (Vitell *et al.*, 2013; Zollo *et al.*, 2018). Integrating the notion of moral intuition (Haidt, 2001) into SF consumption allows for unpacking the inner dynamics describing consumers' expression of ethical identity (Figure 2). Scholars should focus on the typologies of moral emotions (Zollo, 2021), values (Vitell *et al.*, 2013), innate beliefs (Zollo *et al.*, 2017), and 'care' (Heath *et al.*, 2016) that automatically and intuitively shape ethical consumers' moral sense in fashion consumption (see the outcome of Figure 2). The more fashion consumers are aware of their ethical 'I' expression, the more conscious ('Me') they will be about their ethical identity. As a result, consumers' attitudes and intentions to consume sustainable brands' products will increase. Our model assumes that fashion consumers with a solid ethical identity – and, in turn, a high ethical commitment – will incur fewer A-B discrepancies or inconsistencies.

However, more research is needed to investigate ethical blindness (Palazzo *et al.*, 2011) in SF consumption. In other words, how ethical identity might be 'deviated' by excessive reliance on the moral reasoning process (Zollo, 2021) due to consequential logic driven by

price principles or spatial/temporal convenience of fashion products (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Hassan *et al.*, 2016; Johnstone and Tan, 2015). As reported by Zalando (2021), fashion consumers automatically (System 1) feel *guilt* and *hypocrisy* when dealing with SF consumption, admitting that the relationship between fashion and sustainability is somehow unclear and difficult to understand (System 2). Future studies could better investigate consumers' moral reasoning in lessening such 'emotive disablers' toward ethical fashion consumption. Because we hypothesized that moral reasoning has a *post hoc* role in ethical identity expression (see Figure 2), fashion consumers might use their deliberation to follow moral intuition (i.e., the "I" driving ethical commitment) instead of focusing on consequential or utilitarian logic. Moreover, scholars found that "consumers who define themselves strongly through their relationships with close others are less likely to compensate for guilt through ethical consumption" (Chen and Moosmayer, 2020, p.551). This finding confirms the importance for fashion consumers to self-construct their ethical identity through interactions with other consumers, such as community members (Zollo, 2021).

As a second contribution, the framework illustrates the relational component of SF consumption by focusing on how consumers publicly manifest and collectively objectify their social image (Wagner *et al.*, 1999), resulting in ethically engaged social actors (Niinimäki, 2010). We used social representation theory (Moscovici, 1981) to derive new theoretical outputs (*Levers 2 and 6* of Makadok *et al.*, 2018) of the SF phenomenon by proposing how consumers' self-identity expression results in their social image representation, which forms collective ethical engagement. As shown in Figure 3, the 'individual' self of SF consumers becomes an 'aggregate' self (Belk, 2013), representing the 'we-form' of one's identity (Woźniak, 2018), thanks to public acknowledgment by community members. This mechanism is particularly relevant in online and virtual platforms, where the digital self of consumers is co-constructed in a dematerialized environment where ideas, values, beliefs, and 'memorized' content are shared among social peers (Belk, 2013). This process is particularly relevant in the



online and digital landscape: “By creating a structured environment for discourse and associative learning, social media platforms might create ways to shape oppositional or ‘not me’ identities...just like they do ‘me’ identities” (Reed II *et al.*, 2012, p.315). Researchers should better understand if shared practices of social media members will lead to a common language and vocabulary. By adhering to the community’s moral framework of reference, consumers might strengthen the identity-association principle in SF consumption.

Our model assumes that collective ethical engagement reduces the chances of incurring the A-B gap. Ethical engagement is mainly due to group effects, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of shared human experience in SF consumption. Such collective drivers synergically strengthen consumers’ relational responsibility within the community (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2016; Schultz *et al.*, 2022). While the cognitive component (Figure 2) allows consumers to express their self-identity, the relational component (Figure 3) refers to the manifestation of consumers’ social representation in public (Jovchelovitch, 1995; Moscovici, 1981). Hence, group members, peers, and significant others are crucial in SF consumers’ social image formation and public acknowledgment (Zollo, 2021). Scholars could test how ethical consumers’ identity externalization turns into social image objectification (Wagner *et al.*, 1999) in SF consumption (see link 2 of Figure 1). Specifically, it would be beneficial to assess whether collective ethical engagement toward SF consumption can reduce the A-B gap formation in offline and online social spaces (see the outcome of Figure 3).

The third contribution of the framework refers to a novel construct in the SF literature: the Habermasian notion of PS, which ‘contextualizes’ ethical consumers’ identity-image (mis)alignments during the fashion consumption process. These shared discursive spaces (Habermas, 1962/1991) allow public opinions and beliefs to nurture consumers’ ethical commitment and engagement, allowing them to dynamically verify identity-image alignment based on peer reception and feedback (Pegg *et al.*, 2018). Our model assumes this process ends with fashion consumers’ A-B gap self-verification (see step 5 in Figure 4). Modern PSs,

such as online fashion communities, represent the context where consumers might self-verify their social representation congruity with their ethical identity (i.e., OSI) and moral personality (Reed II *et al.*, 2012). Because our framework proposes new causal mechanisms and constructs (*Lever 3* and *4*, respectively, of Makadok *et al.*, 2018) of the SF phenomenon, scholars could test how fashion consumers voice their ethical selves in digital environments and how the five linkages illustrated in Figure 4 might be ‘broken,’ resulting in A-B gaps in SF consumption. It would be interesting to explore the dynamic feedback loops shown in Figure 4 to understand how ethical consumers change their fashion consumption practices, achieving self-congruity.

#### *Managerial implications*

Our framework allows marketers to recognize the inner cognitive elements shaping ethical consumer self-identity expression (Figure 2). Consistent with recent research (Zollo, 2021), SF brands’ communication and advertising strategies should evoke instant positive perceptions and emotions that favor consumers’ moral reasoning in realizing their ethical commitment toward a brand’s values and mission (Ingram *et al.*, 2005). The more ethical consumers perceive brands’ communication as coherent and congruent with their self-identity (the outcome in Figure 2), the higher the consumer’s ethical commitment to sustaining the company through purchase intention and brand loyalty. However, nurturing fashion consumers’ ethical commitment is a complex challenge: “If something fits right, that’s the most important thing for me. I’m not buying something because half of the profits will go to the environment. It just doesn’t convince me” (Zalando, 2021). Because fashion is a symbolic aesthetic of existence (Niinimäki, 2010), marketers need to target the “Me” of ethical consumers (i.e., moral reasoning) to convince them about the brand’s features such as quality, price premium, value, transparency, manufacturing, and responsibility. A brand’s communication should explain (i.e., ‘educate’) how fashion consumers might care for, repair,

and recycle their products, thus engaging and committing in the post-purchase stages. As a result, the ethical brand's advertising must fit with the socially represented consumer's self-identity. In the words of Monki's (H&M group) Global Sustainability Manager: "Our colleagues want to have an open dialogue with their community. By collecting common questions via social media, they are able to address how they work with sustainability throughout the supply chain, production, people in factories and living wages, but also how they are thinking ahead, what they dream to do and change and how they believe in a different fashion industry in the future" (Zalando, 2021).

Next, the model's relational and contextual components stress a significant implication for marketers, which refers to the crucial role group members play in the social space where fashion consumption occurs. When ethical consumers perceive a 'shared human experience,' thus developing a sense of belonging to groups and communities, they respond favorably to sustainable brands (Schultz *et al.*, 2022). Hence, marketers should foster customers' belongingness, membership, and value co-creation in SF brand communities, allowing members to verify their self-identity and social image. An example is the mission of the SF community *Sustainable\_+\_Slow\_Lifestyle\_Community*: "This space is here, first and foremost, to serve as a support group for anyone on a journey to change their lifestyle for the better. We are here to offer each other advice, words of encouragement, and to share helpful resources. We are also here to socialize and get to know each other - to share our successes, roadblocks and any experience in between." Managers of brands in PSs must learn their institutional and contextual role as social actors in a public environment of interacting and interdependent psycho-sociological relations. A deep understanding of the community's values and mission is fundamental to being perceived as a well-positioned brand in that specific social space (Casais and Faria, 2022; Shlaile *et al.*, 2018). This is key to the brand's identity-image alignment in online environments (Belk, 2013). Because PSs survive thanks to members' UGC, brands' FGC should be aligned with the narrative communication accepted

by the community. For example, fashion consumers highly debate influencers' credibility about sustainable consumption: "I think we're still missing a role model in the fashion industry" (Zalando, 2021). Marketers should choose credible, sincere activists and leaders who inspire ethical consumers. In online advertising, language (i.e., politeness as a communication strategy) affects consumers' judgment and attitude toward a brand (Sundar and Cao, 2020). Companies should avoid greenwashing by being perceived as 'strangers,' not knowing or adhering to the members' shared values and responsibilities. The fashion brand's identity should become part of the community's aggregate self (Belk, 2013). Consumers should be able to actively co-construct a brand's identity by sharing consumption experiences that will be collectively and symbolically objectified by the group's members (Wagner *et al.*, 1999), resulting in a publicly acknowledged and integrated brand image. In this way, a fashion brand might become a symbolic vehicle (Niinimäki, 2010) through which ethical consumers can express their self-identity with community members and socially represent their public image in PSs.

#### *Limitations and future research*

Because of its theoretical nature, one of the main limitations of the paper is that the hypothesized propositions need to be empirically supported. Future researchers could test the framework in experimental settings to confirm our assumptions that, first, ethical consumers' identity and ethical commitment in fashion consumption result from cognitive components (i.e., the 'I' and the 'Me'), which are *a priori* unconscious (i.e., moral intuition in System 1) and *post hoc* rationalized (i.e., moral reasoning in System 2). Next, shared moral frameworks in social groups play a crucial role in co-constructing ethical consumers' social image (i.e., the 'We') and public ethical engagement in fashion communities. Finally, the PS is the intersubjective and discursive space where ethical consumers collectively shape their aggregate sense of self (i.e., OSI in digital environments) and self-verify the identity-image

alignment through fashion consumption practices. It would be interesting to specifically test how the ‘broken links’ mechanisms work at each stage (i.e., cognitive, relational, and contextual; see Figures 2, 3, and 4). Specifically, researchers should assess ethical consumers’ *honesty* in fashion communities by comparing their represented social image (i.e., OSI) against their true self-identity. This would help better understand why and how ethical consumers ‘don’t walk their talks’ (Carrington *et al.*, 2010; Govind *et al.*, 2019) in fashion consumption.

Researchers could test whether the proposed linkages of the framework (Figure 1) work differently among generational cohorts (e.g., Millennials vs. Gen Z), gender, cultures (i.e., individualistic vs. collectivistic countries; Han *et al.*, 2016), physical and digital spaces, or mobile/in-app vs. desktop e-commerce. In addition, future research might investigate the ethical fashion consumption phenomenon using different cognitive, relational, and philosophical perspectives. For example, the pragmatist view of value in the ethical consumption experience and the value-belief-attitude logic of ethical consumers are relevant perspectives highlighting the role of ethical consumers’ values in fashion consumption (Jung *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, the theory of care and commitment in sustainable consumption (Heath *et al.*, 2016) could enrich our proposed model by focusing on the role of consumers’ caring toward others and their expression of an ethical commitment (Ingram *et al.*, 2005) toward fashion brands.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Ethical consumers might not belong to groups, movements, or communities, thus purchasing a fashion product for their self-interest without the need to manifest it publicly. These consumers ‘end’ the process described in our framework at the first cognitive component (see Figure 2), being interested in self-constructing their ethical identity but not expressing nor representing it publicly. We consider ethical consumers willing to express their self-identity and represent their social image in public communities (see Link 2 in Figure 1).

<sup>[2]</sup> An example is the [Ethical Fashion Initiative](#) (EFI), an international community connecting consumers, artisans, social enterprises, and brand partners to produce sustainable fashion items in

developing countries such as Burkina Faso, Haiti, Kenya, and Mali. EFI is active on social media such as Instagram (75k followers) and Facebook (20k followers).

[3] Social identity and social image refer to an individual's *public persona*, interpreted as “the identity presented to others in public contexts” (see [American Psychological Association](#) definition). In the following sections, we will use the notion of *social image*.

[4] The Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI) and the other example in the next section represent successful examples of ‘collective ethical spaces’ of fashion consumption.

[5] A well-known example of ethical consumption PS is [Ethical Consumer](#) defined as “an independent, not-for-profit, multistakeholder co-operative with open membership... helping consumers to shop ethically, campaigners to challenge corporate power and businesses to improve their supply chains”. As a physical (i.e., magazine) and digital (i.e., website, social media) platform for publishing information and engaging consumers about ethical consumption, *Ethical Consumer* explores how fashion and clothing might become more sustainable.

[6] Examples are *Slow\_Fashion\_Exchange* (founded by influencer and slow fashion campaigner Venetia La Manna, 40k followers on [Instagram](#)), *Sustainable\_Fashion\_Professionals* (managed by *Common Objective*, 15k members on [LinkedIn](#)), *My\_Green\_Closet\_Community* (created by sustainable fashion content creator Verena Erin Polowy, 3k members on [Facebook](#)), *Ethical\_Sustainable\_Fashion\_Collective* (6k followers on [Instagram](#)), and *Sustainable\_+\_Slow\_Lifestyle\_Community* (3k members on [Facebook](#)).

[7] Available at: <https://corporate.zalando.com/en/our-impact/sustainability/sustainability-reports/attitude-behavior-gap-report>.

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