

RESTORING CREDIBILITY IN SUSTAINABLE COMMERCE: THE ROLE OF BRAND TRANSPARENCY AND CONSUMER TRUST IN MITIGATING GREEN SKEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

As environmental awareness intensifies globally, consumers are increasingly skeptical of corporate green claims owing to the proliferation of greenwashing practices. This conceptual paper examines how green skepticism undermines sustainable purchase intention and how brand transparency and consumer trust individually operate as direct antecedents of sustainable purchasing behaviour. Drawing upon Persuasion Knowledge Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, an integrated conceptual model is developed that treats green skepticism as an independent variable, brand transparency and consumer trust as distinct independent constructs, and sustainable purchase intention as the dependent variable. Through a systematic thematic synthesis of more than 40 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025, three theoretically grounded hypotheses are proposed to guide future empirical inquiry. The framework extends existing sustainability marketing literature and offers practical guidance for brands seeking to restore credibility in the green marketplace. Authentic transparency combined with verifiable sustainability claims is identified as the primary pathway through which consumer trust is cultivated and skepticism is attenuated.

Keywords: brand transparency; consumer trust; green skepticism; greenwashing; sustainable purchase intention

1. INTRODUCTION

The global shift toward sustainable consumption represents one of the most consequential commercial transformations of the twenty-first century. Growing public awareness of climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion has prompted both consumers and corporations to reexamine their ecological footprints (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). However, this heightened consciousness has been accompanied by a parallel rise in consumer skepticism, rooted in the widespread practice of greenwashing, whereby firms exaggerate or misrepresent the environmental credentials of their products (Nguyen et al., 2019). The resulting credibility gap between corporate sustainability claims and perceived corporate reality poses a formidable barrier to sustainable consumption.

Green skepticism-defined as consumers' tendency to doubt the veracity of brand environmental assertions-has been shown to exert consistently negative effects on purchase intention across diverse product categories and markets (Lexmana et al., 2025; Sun & Shi, 2022). Tarabieh (2021) demonstrates that greenwashing generates green confusion and perceived risk, eroding the willingness of even environmentally motivated consumers to act on their values. Brand transparency and consumer trust have emerged as theoretically robust antidotes to this credibility deficit (Verrus et al., 2025; Bouriche et al., 2024). Despite growing scholarly interest in each of these constructs individually, the literature lacks an integrated conceptual model that simultaneously positions green skepticism, brand transparency, and consumer trust in direct relationship with sustainable purchase intention. This paper addresses that gap.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Green Skepticism: Conceptualisation and Consequences

Green skepticism refers to a persistent consumer disposition to doubt the truthfulness and sincerity of corporate environmental claims. Lexmana et al. (2025) define it as a negative cognitive evaluation characterised by doubt about false advertising and a perceived discrepancy between declared commitments and observable organisational behaviour. The theoretical roots of green skepticism lie in information asymmetry-the structural inequality between what organisations know about their true environmental performance and what consumers can feasibly verify (Tarabieh, 2021).

Sun and Shi (2022) demonstrate that perceived deception engenders betrayal that generalises from individual products to entire brand portfolios, significantly reducing purchase intention. Afianto and Waskito (2025)

establish that greenwashing perceptions negatively affect trust and purchase intention. Zhang et al. (2025) confirm that green skepticism moderates the relationship between perceived ESG performance and purchase intention, demonstrating its capacity to undermine even empirically grounded sustainability signals. Xiao et al. (2022) further document that skepticism engenders brand avoidance and negative word-of-mouth beyond the immediate purchase decision.

Table 1: Green Skepticism - Antecedents, Manifestations, and Behavioural Consequences

Dimension	Definition / Mechanism	Representative Empirical Evidence	Behavioural Outcome
Cognitive skepticism	Doubt about factual accuracy of environmental claims	Lexmana et al. (2025); Tarabieh (2021)	Reduced purchase intention
Affective skepticism	Emotional betrayal arising from perceived deception	Sun & Shi (2022); Nguyen et al. (2019)	Brand avoidance; negative WOM
Structural skepticism	Industry-level credibility deficit from pervasive greenwashing	Adamkiewicz et al. (2022); Santos et al. (2023)	Generalised distrust across product categories
ESG-moderated skepticism	Skepticism undermines response to positive sustainability signals	Zhang et al. (2025)	Attenuates even empirically grounded signals
Greenwashing awareness	Conscious recognition of deceptive eco-claims amplifies skepticism	Afianto & Waskito (2025)	Stronger negative effect on trust and intention

2.2 Brand Transparency as a Credibility Signal

Brand transparency refers to the degree to which organisations disclose accurate, complete, and accessible information about their environmental practices, supply chain processes, and sustainability commitments. Verrus et al. (2025) characterise it as a multidimensional construct encompassing supply chain transparency, eco-labelling transparency, and advertising transparency. The conceptual power of brand transparency derives from its function as a costly signal: disclosures that entail genuine investment-such as third-party audits, supply chain mapping, and verified certification-are credible precisely because they are difficult to counterfeit (Alyahia et al., 2024).

Baharuddin et al. (2026) establish that transparent green branding directly reduces consumer skepticism and fosters sustainable purchasing behaviour. Ali et al. (2026) document that sustainability label credibility

directly and positively influences green purchase intention, with skeptical consumers exhibiting stronger responses to certified claims than uncertified assertions. Uikey et al. (2025) confirm that green transparency positively influences brand credibility and brand loyalty among electric vehicle consumers. An important nuance is that the effectiveness of transparency is contingent upon verifiability: Alyahia et al. (2024) demonstrate that the combination of transparency and authenticity-rather than transparency alone-is required to significantly attenuate greenwashing perceptions.

2.3 Consumer Trust and Sustainable Purchase Intention

Consumer trust in sustainable commerce reflects the confidence consumers place in the credibility, reliability, and benevolence of brand environmental claims (Bouriche et al., 2024). Empirical evidence consistently establishes consumer trust as a direct positive antecedent of sustainable purchase intention. Bouriche et al. (2024) demonstrate that green brand trust directly and significantly predicts purchase intention. Hazarika et al. (2025) confirm that green brand trust positively influences sustainable purchase intention by buffering consumers against the negative effects of greenwashing perceptions. Udaigiri (2026) confirms through meta-analysis that sustainability-driven purchase decisions are most strongly predicted by trust and perceived credibility.

Table 2: Comparative Summary of Key Constructs and Their Relationships to Sustainable Purchase Intention

Construct	Direction	Theoretical Basis	Key Studies	Operationalisation
Green skepticism	Negative (-)	Persuasion Knowledge Theory	Lexmana et al. (2025); Sun & Shi (2022); Tarabieh (2021)	Consumer doubt, perceived deception, brand avoidance tendency
Brand transparency	Positive (+)	Signaling Theory	Verrus et al. (2025); Baharuddin et al. (2026); Uikey et al. (2025)	Supply chain disclosure, eco-label verification, advertising authenticity
Consumer trust	Positive (+)	Theory of Planned Behaviour	Bouriche et al. (2024); Hazarika et al. (2025); Udaigiri (2026)	Credibility, reliability, benevolence perceptions of brand green claims

3. RESEARCH GAPS AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

A systematic review of the extant literature reveals four significant gaps. First, green skepticism has been consistently identified as a negative predictor of sustainable purchase intention but its direct effect is frequently examined in isolation from other constructs (Lexmana et al., 2025; Sun & Shi, 2022). Second, brand transparency is most frequently studied as a trust-building mechanism rather than as a direct antecedent of purchase intention in its own right (Baharuddin et al., 2026; Verrus et al., 2025). Third, consumer trust is predominantly examined as a mediating variable in complex structural models, obscuring its direct and independent contribution to sustainable purchase intention (Bouriche et al., 2024). Fourth, no existing conceptual model simultaneously positions all three constructs—green skepticism, brand transparency, and consumer trust—as direct predictors of sustainable purchase intention within a single parsimonious framework.

Greenwashing has generated a systemic credibility deficit in sustainable commerce that imposes measurable costs on both consumer welfare and genuine sustainability progress. This paper addresses that deficiency by proposing a parsimonious conceptual model grounded in three complementary theories.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Persuasion Knowledge Theory

Persuasion Knowledge Theory (PKT), developed by Friestad and Wright (1994) and extended to green marketing by Lexmana et al. (2025), posits that consumers develop cognitive and affective defences upon perceiving that a communication is intended to persuade them. In sustainability marketing, these defences manifest as skepticism—a learned tendency to question the sincerity of environmental claims. PKT predicts that when consumers interpret a green claim as manipulative, skepticism intensifies and purchase intention diminishes. Conversely, brand transparency, understood as disclosure rather than persuasion, directly reduces green skepticism by reframing the communicative act.

4.2 Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), applied to sustainability marketing by Verrus et al. (2025) and Alyahia et al. (2024), addresses information asymmetry by theorising that organisations can transmit credible

information through costly, verifiable signals that fraudulent actors cannot rationally replicate. In sustainable commerce, brand transparency across supply chain, certification, labelling, and advertising dimensions constitutes precisely such a signal portfolio. Consumers who recognise transparency as a costly signal respond with reduced skepticism and heightened trust, translating into stronger purchase intentions (Uikey et al., 2025; Baharuddin et al., 2026).

4.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), applied to green consumer behaviour by Vafaei-Zadeh et al. (2024), posits that behavioural intention is determined by attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Consumer trust directly shapes all three TPB components: it cultivates positive attitudes by affirming environmental benefits are genuine, reinforces subjective norms, and enhances perceived behavioural control by reducing perceived purchase risk (Bouriche et al., 2024; Hazarika et al., 2025). Green skepticism conversely undermines all three components simultaneously.

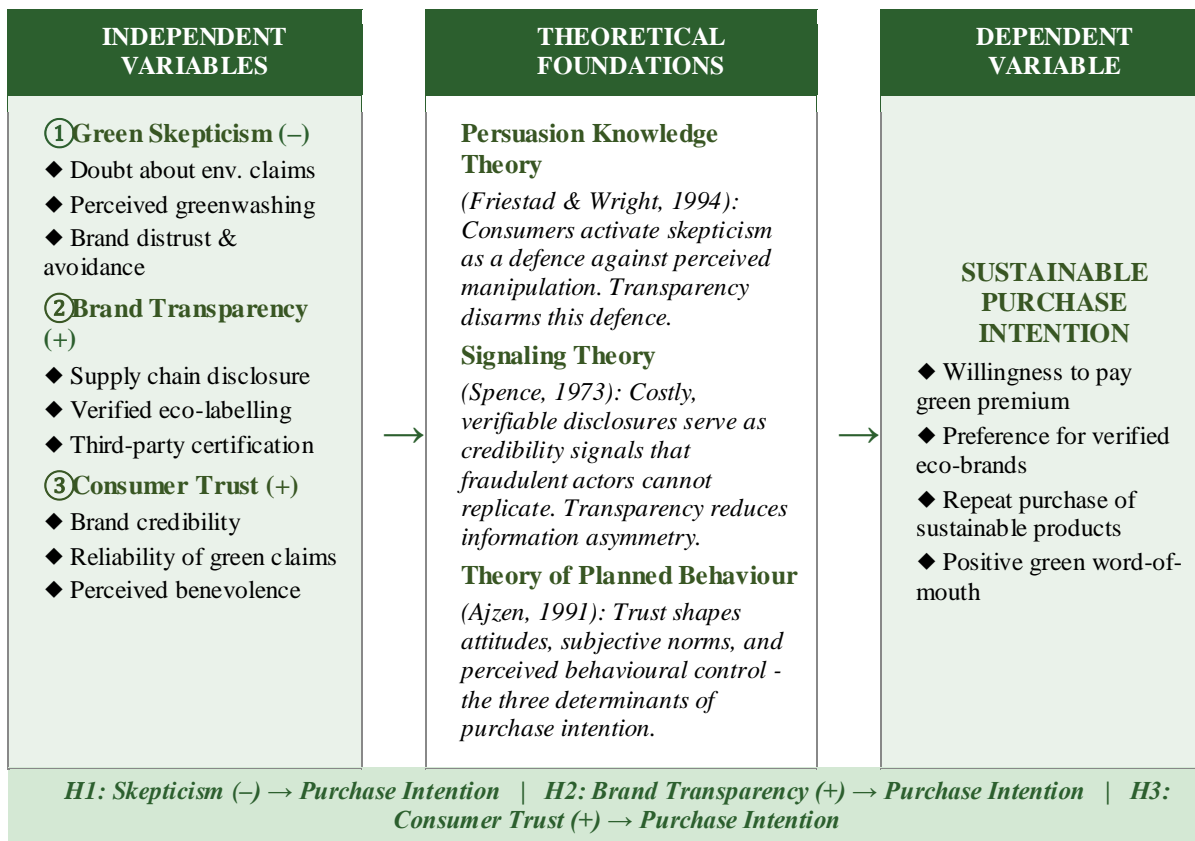
Table 3: Theoretical Framework - Mapping Theories to Constructs and Hypotheses

Theory	Core Proposition	Construct Explained	Predicted Relationship	Supporting Scholars
Persuasion Knowledge Theory	Perceived persuasive intent activates consumer cognitive defences	Green Skepticism	Skepticism (-) → Purchase Intention	Friestad & Wright (1994); Lexmana et al. (2025)
Signaling Theory	Costly, verifiable disclosures resolve information asymmetry credibly	Brand Transparency	Transparency (+) → Purchase Intention	Spence (1973); Verrus et al. (2025); Alyahia et al. (2024)
Theory of Planned Behaviour	Trust shapes attitude, norms, and perceived control	Consumer Trust	Trust (+) → Purchase Intention	Ajzen (1991); Bouriche et al. (2024); Hazarika et al. (2025)

5. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND PROPOSED HYPOTHESES

The proposed conceptual model specifies three constructs as direct predictors of sustainable purchase intention: green skepticism, brand transparency, and consumer trust, without invoking mediating or moderating pathways. This deliberate parsimony provides a clean foundation for initial empirical validation.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework - Green Skepticism, Brand Transparency, Consumer Trust, and Sustainable Purchase Intention



Source: Authors' own conceptualisation (2025)

Table 4: Proposed Hypotheses

Hyp.	Proposed Statement
H₁	Green skepticism is directly and negatively associated with sustainable purchase intention (Lexmana et al., 2025; Sun & Shi, 2022; Tarabieh, 2021).
H₂	Brand transparency is directly and positively associated with sustainable purchase intention (Verrus et al., 2025; Baharuddin et al., 2026; Uikey et al., 2025).
H₃	Consumer trust is directly and positively associated with sustainable purchase intention (Bouriche et al., 2024; Hazarika et al., 2025; Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2024).

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual research design, a recognised approach for theory development in management and marketing research (Jaakkola, 2020). The epistemological orientation is constructivist, seeking to build explanatory understanding through systematic integration of existing empirical evidence. A structured and replicable literature search was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science databases, supplemented by targeted Google Scholar searches. Search strings included: green skepticism, greenwashing, brand transparency, consumer trust, sustainable purchase intention, green marketing credibility, eco-labelling, green brand trust, and Signaling theory sustainability.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) publication in a peer-reviewed Scopus- or Web of Science-indexed journal; (b) publication between 2019 and 2025, with select foundational studies retained where theoretically critical; (c) substantive engagement with at least one focal construct; and (d) availability in English. A total of 51 studies met the inclusion criteria and are incorporated into the thematic synthesis. The included studies were coded and organised into three thematic clusters-green skepticism, brand transparency, and consumer trust-and analysed for conceptualisation, theoretical grounding, directionality of relationships, and methodological context.

Table 5: Methodological Profile of the Study

Parameter	This Study
Research Design	Conceptual-integrative (theory development)
Epistemological Stance	Constructivist - systematic integration of existing empirical evidence
Database Sources	Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar
Publication Period	2019–2025 (core); foundational works retained
Inclusion Criteria	Peer-reviewed, indexed, English-language, relevant to ≥ 1 focal construct
Studies Synthesised	51 peer-reviewed studies meeting inclusion criteria
Analysis Method	Thematic synthesis across three construct clusters
Framework Development	Two-stage: thematic synthesis \rightarrow theoretical integration (PKT, ST, TPB)

7. DISCUSSION

The evidence synthesised in this paper confirms that green skepticism functions as a systematic suppressor of purchase intention, operating through both cognitive and affective pathways (Zhang et al., 2025; Afianto & Waskito, 2025; Lexmana et al., 2025). Critically, skepticism is not reducible to individual consumer psychology but is a structural response to industry-level credibility deficits created and sustained by greenwashing. Sun and Shi (2022) and Xiao et al. (2022) further establish that skepticism engenders brand avoidance and negative word-of-mouth, amplifying its effects beyond the immediate purchase decision.

The synthesis provides convergent evidence that brand transparency exerts a direct and positive influence on sustainable purchase intention, supporting H2. Baharuddin et al. (2026) and Uikey et al. (2025) document this direct effect across market contexts, while Poulis et al. (2026) extend it to digital influencer environments. The evidence supporting H3 is particularly robust. Bouriche et al. (2024), Hazarika et al. (2025), and Alhomaïd (2025) report significant positive direct effects of consumer trust on sustainable purchase intention across diverse product categories. Udaigiri's (2026) meta-analysis confirms trust as among the strongest and most consistent predictors of sustainability-driven purchase decisions.

8. IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Theoretical Implications

This paper makes three contributions. First, by applying PKT to green skepticism, it establishes skepticism as a theoretically coherent defence mechanism with direct behavioural consequences, extending PKT beyond traditional advertising into sustainability marketing. Second, it advances Signaling Theory by specifying that multidimensionality, verifiability, and investment cost distinguish genuine transparency from symbolic green communication. Third, the integrated three-construct framework-positioning green skepticism, brand transparency, and consumer trust as co-equal direct predictors of sustainable purchase intention-has not previously been theorised in the literature (Marcin et al., 2025).

8.2 Managerial Implications

Firms should invest in substantive rather than symbolic transparency: verifiable disclosures such as third-party audits, supply chain mapping, and certified labelling generate stronger consumer responses than narrative-driven green messaging (Uikey et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2026). Trust should be tracked as a key performance indicator alongside brand equity metrics. Organisations in high-skepticism sectors-fast fashion,

food, beverages-should design transparency communications that address both the rational and emotional dimensions of consumer doubt (Baharuddin et al., 2026).

8.3 Policy Implications

Standardised mandatory eco-labelling requirements backed by independent verification are essential to address the systemic credibility deficit created by greenwashing (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). Enforcement of anti-greenwashing regulations with meaningful deterrent penalties is a necessary complement to voluntary transparency initiatives (Li et al., 2022).

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has developed an integrated conceptual framework examining how green skepticism, brand transparency, and consumer trust directly influence sustainable purchase intention in contemporary markets characterised by pervasive greenwashing. Drawing upon Persuasion Knowledge Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and grounded in a systematic thematic synthesis of over 40 peer-reviewed empirical studies, three directly testable hypotheses have been proposed. Green skepticism is confirmed as a robust, structurally embedded inhibitor of sustainable consumer behaviour. Brand transparency, operationalised as verifiable and multidimensional disclosure of sustainability practices, emerges as a direct and powerful antecedent of purchase intention. Consumer trust is confirmed as the pivotal psychological construct that converts positive environmental orientations into sustainable purchasing behaviour.

10. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a conceptual paper, this study does not generate primary empirical evidence; the proposed hypotheses require empirical validation before their magnitude and boundary conditions can be established. The systematic literature review is subject to publication bias, as studies reporting null findings are underrepresented in academic databases (Santos et al., 2023). Geographic concentration of reviewed studies in Western and East Asian markets restricts transferability to other contexts (Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2024). Future research should prioritise empirical validation of the three hypotheses using large-scale survey data across multiple countries and product categories. Longitudinal research designs are critically needed to assess whether transparency-built trust is durable over time.

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