

CONSPICUOUS CONSERVATION: THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE BRAND CHOICES IN SIGNALING IDENTITY AND SOCIAL STATUS

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of conspicuous conservation, focusing on how sustainable brand choices function as signals of identity and social status in contemporary consumer behavior. As sustainability becomes increasingly visible in the marketplace, consumers are not only motivated by environmental concerns but also by the desire to express values and gain social recognition. Using a narrative literature review, this study integrates insights from marketing, sociology, and consumer psychology to explore the dual role of sustainable consumption as both ethical behavior and symbolic signaling. The findings highlight key themes, including sustainability as identity expression, status signaling through ethical consumption, the role of visibility, and the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The study further explains the mechanisms of conspicuous conservation, emphasizing the importance of social comparison, cultural context, and public visibility in shaping consumer behavior. In addition, several moderating factors are identified, such as income, cultural norms, brand credibility, and consumer awareness. A conceptual framework is proposed to illustrate how sustainable choices translate into social recognition and consumer outcomes. The article contributes by linking sustainability with signaling theory and offers practical implications for designing authentic and effective sustainable branding strategies.

Keywords: *Conspicuous conservation; sustainable consumption; identity signaling; social status; ethical consumer behavior*

INTRODUCTION

The growing global emphasis on environmental sustainability has significantly transformed consumer behavior and marketing practices. Increasing awareness of climate change, resource depletion, and social responsibility has encouraged consumers to make more ethical and environmentally conscious purchasing decisions (Lim, 2022). As a result, sustainability has become a central consideration in modern consumption patterns. This shift has been supported by the rise of ethical consumption, where individuals seek to align their purchasing choices with their personal values and beliefs. Consumers are no longer solely motivated by functional benefits but also by the social and environmental impact of their decisions. Consequently, sustainability has evolved from a niche concern into a mainstream expectation in many markets (Gahlawat et al., 2025).

Alongside this shift, there has been a growing visibility of eco-friendly brands that actively promote sustainability as a core part of their identity. Companies increasingly highlight environmentally responsible practices, such as the use of recycled materials, carbon-neutral production, and ethical sourcing. These efforts are often communicated through branding, packaging, and marketing campaigns, making sustainable choices more visible to consumers and society (Shen, 2024). The visibility of such brands not only informs consumer decisions but also contributes to shaping social norms around responsible consumption. As eco-friendly products become more accessible and recognizable, they also acquire symbolic meaning beyond their functional attributes (Ristanti, 2025). This increased visibility plays a key role in how sustainable consumption is perceived and valued in social contexts. However, this trend also introduces a complex problem, as sustainability is not only an ethical behavior but also a potential means of signaling social identity and status. While some consumers engage in sustainable consumption

out of genuine concern for the environment, others may be motivated by the desire to project a certain image or gain social recognition (Nie et al., 2021). This dual motivation creates tension between intrinsic values and extrinsic signaling. In some cases, sustainable choices may function as a form of conspicuous consumption, where individuals display their environmental consciousness to enhance their social standing. This raises important questions about the authenticity of sustainable behavior and its underlying motivations. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for evaluating the broader implications of sustainable consumption in society (Anjorin et al., 2024).

This article aims to examine the concept of conspicuous conservation and explore how sustainable brand choices are used to signal identity and social status. By integrating insights from marketing, sociology, and consumer psychology, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic role of sustainability in consumption. It focuses on identifying the mechanisms through which sustainable choices communicate social meaning and influence perceptions. In doing so, the article contributes to both theoretical and practical discussions on ethical consumption and branding. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of distinguishing between genuine and performative sustainability in consumer behavior. Ultimately, the study aims to offer insights that help organizations design more authentic and socially responsible sustainability strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable consumption has evolved significantly from a narrow focus on environmental awareness to a broader concept of ethical consumerism. In its early stages, sustainability was primarily associated with environmental protection, emphasizing issues such as pollution reduction, conservation of natural resources, and ecological preservation (Panda et al., 2020). Consumers who engaged in sustainable behavior were often motivated by a sense of responsibility toward the environment. Over time, this perspective expanded to include social and ethical considerations, such as fair trade, labor practices, and corporate social responsibility. This shift reflects a growing recognition that consumption choices have wider implications beyond environmental impact (Alam & Alam, 2025). As a result, ethical consumerism now encompasses a more holistic approach that integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions. This evolution has transformed sustainability into a key factor influencing consumer decision-making.

The growth of green marketing and eco-labeling has played a crucial role in supporting this transition. Companies increasingly use marketing strategies to highlight the environmental and ethical attributes of their products, making sustainability more visible and accessible to consumers. Eco-labels, certifications, and sustainability claims provide signals that help consumers identify responsible products in the marketplace (Alam & Alam, 2025). These tools not only facilitate informed decision-making but also encourage competition among firms to adopt more sustainable practices. However, the proliferation of green marketing has also raised concerns about greenwashing, where companies exaggerate or misrepresent their sustainability efforts. This has led to increased scrutiny and skepticism among consumers. Despite these challenges, green marketing and eco-labeling remain important mechanisms for promoting sustainable consumption and shaping consumer behavior (Lyu & Mañas-Viniegra, 2021).

Conspicuous Consumption Theory

Conspicuous consumption theory, originally proposed by Thorstein Veblen, provides a foundational framework for understanding how consumption can serve as a means of signaling social status. According to Veblen, individuals engage in visible consumption of goods and services to demonstrate wealth, prestige, and social position (Lim, 2022). This form of consumption is not solely driven by functional needs but by the desire to gain recognition and distinction within a social hierarchy. Luxury goods, in particular, have traditionally served as symbols of status, allowing individuals to communicate their economic power. Over time, this concept has been widely applied in marketing and consumer research to explain behavior related to branding, lifestyle, and identity (Gahlawat et al., 2025). It highlights the social and symbolic dimensions of consumption beyond mere utility. As such, conspicuous consumption remains a key concept in understanding modern consumer behavior.

In recent years, the nature of status signaling has shifted from traditional luxury consumption toward more “moral” or “ethical” forms of signaling. Consumers increasingly use sustainable and socially responsible products to convey values such as environmental consciousness and social awareness. This transition reflects changes in societal norms, where ethical behavior is increasingly associated with prestige and respect (Shen, 2024). As a result, sustainable consumption can function as a new form of status display, replacing or complementing traditional luxury signals. This phenomenon suggests that status is no longer defined solely by wealth but also by values and lifestyle

choices. Consequently, brands that emphasize sustainability can become powerful symbols of identity and social standing. This shift highlights the evolving relationship between consumption, values, and social status (Ristanti, 2025).

Concept of Conspicuous Conservation

The concept of conspicuous conservation emerges from the intersection of sustainable consumption and conspicuous consumption theory. It refers to the practice of engaging in environmentally friendly behaviors in a visible manner to signal social identity and status. Unlike traditional forms of consumption that emphasize wealth, conspicuous conservation focuses on demonstrating moral values and environmental responsibility (Nie et al., 2021). This concept has gained prominence as sustainability becomes more socially valued and publicly recognized. Consumers may choose eco-friendly products not only for their environmental benefits but also for the social recognition they provide. This behavior reflects the growing importance of symbolic consumption in shaping identity and social relationships. As such, conspicuous conservation represents a new dimension of consumer behavior in contemporary markets (Anjorin et al., 2024).

Sustainable behavior as a visible social signal plays a central role in this concept. Products such as reusable bags, electric vehicles, and eco-labeled goods serve as markers of environmental consciousness that are easily observed by others (Panda et al., 2020). These visible signals allow consumers to communicate their values and align themselves with socially desirable identities. Social media and digital platforms further amplify this visibility, enabling individuals to showcase their sustainable choices to a wider audience. However, this visibility also raises questions about authenticity, as some behaviors may be motivated more by social recognition than genuine concern. This creates a tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in sustainable consumption (Alam & Alam, 2025). Understanding this dynamic is essential for evaluating the role of sustainability in identity construction and social signaling.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative literature review as its research design to explore the role of sustainable consumption in signaling identity and social status. Unlike systematic reviews, which rely on strict protocols and comprehensive search strategies, the narrative approach allows for greater flexibility in examining interdisciplinary topics. The concept of conspicuous conservation lies at the intersection of marketing, sociology, and environmental studies, making a qualitative and integrative method particularly appropriate. The review draws on a range of sources, including academic journals in marketing, sociology, and environmental studies, as well as relevant industry and policy reports. This diverse selection of sources ensures that both theoretical perspectives and practical insights are considered. By combining these viewpoints, the study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how sustainability functions as a social signal in consumer behavior.

The inclusion criteria for the selected literature are based on relevance to key themes such as sustainable consumption, signaling theory, and consumer identity. Only sources that contribute to understanding the symbolic and social dimensions of sustainability were included in the analysis. A thematic synthesis approach is employed to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and relationships across the literature. This method allows for the organization of findings into coherent themes that support the development of a conceptual framework. However, the study is subject to limitations due to its non-systematic scope, which may introduce selection bias and limit the exhaustiveness of the review. Despite these limitations, the narrative approach provides valuable interpretive insights and enables a holistic examination of the topic. Ultimately, this methodology supports the integration of diverse perspectives to better understand the role of conspicuous conservation in modern consumer behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Key Themes Identified

One of the key themes identified in the review is sustainability as a form of identity expression, where consumers use eco-friendly choices to communicate who they are and what they value. Sustainable consumption is no longer limited to functional or ethical considerations but has become a symbolic act that reflects personal beliefs and lifestyle (Lyu & Mañas-Viniegra, 2021). Consumers increasingly align themselves with brands that represent environmental responsibility, social justice, and ethical practices. This alignment allows individuals to construct and reinforce their self-identity through consumption. In this context, brands act as vehicles for expressing values and belonging to certain social groups (Mouammime & Azdimousa, 2023). As a result, sustainability becomes an important component of identity construction in modern consumer behavior.

Another important theme is status signaling through ethical consumption, where sustainable choices serve as markers of social distinction. Consumers may use eco-friendly products to signal moral superiority, social awareness, or cultural sophistication. This behavior is closely linked to visibility and social recognition, as the signaling function depends on others being able to observe these choices. Products such as electric vehicles, reusable items, or ethically sourced goods become visible indicators of status (Garofalo & Gallucci, 2021). However, this dynamic also introduces a tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. While some consumers are genuinely motivated by environmental concerns, others may be driven by the desire for social approval or recognition. This tension highlights the complexity of sustainable consumption and the need to distinguish between authentic and performative behaviors (Sposini, 2024).

Table 1. Key Themes in Conspicuous Conservation and Sustainable Consumption Signaling

Theme	Definition	Key Characteristics	Strategic Implications
Sustainability as Identity Expression	Use of sustainable choices to express personal values and self-identity	Value alignment, symbolic consumption, brand association	Enables brands to position as identity markers and build deeper emotional connections
Status Signaling through Ethical Consumption	Use of eco-friendly products to signal social status and distinction	Moral signaling, cultural sophistication, visible consumption	Positions sustainability as a status symbol, enhancing brand desirability
Visibility and Social Recognition	Importance of observable sustainable behaviors for social acknowledgment	Public display, recognizable products (e.g., EVs, reusable goods)	Encourages design of visible sustainability features to strengthen signaling effects
Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation	Tension between genuine concern and desire for social approval	Authentic vs. performative behavior, mixed motivations	Requires balancing authenticity to avoid skepticism and maintain consumer trust

The table as shown in Figure 1 highlights four interconnected themes that explain how sustainable consumption functions as both a personal and social phenomenon. Sustainability as identity expression emphasizes that consumers use eco-friendly choices to communicate their values and construct their self-concept, with brands serving as symbolic tools in this process. This is closely linked to status signaling through ethical consumption, where individuals leverage sustainable products to convey social distinction, moral awareness, and cultural sophistication (Christensen et al., 2022). The role of visibility and social recognition further reinforces this dynamic, as the effectiveness of signaling depends on the ability of others to observe and interpret these behaviors. At the same time, the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations reveals the complexity underlying sustainable consumption, where actions may be driven by genuine environmental concern or by the desire for social approval (Lim, 2022). This interplay highlights the risk of performative behavior, which can undermine authenticity and credibility. Overall, the table demonstrates that successful sustainable marketing strategies must balance visibility, status appeal, and authenticity to maintain trust and long-term engagement (Gahlawat et al., 2025).

Mechanisms of Conspicuous Conservation

The mechanisms of conspicuous conservation are largely driven by the visibility of sustainable choices, which allows them to function as social signals. Visible behaviors, such as using eco-friendly products or adopting sustainable lifestyles, enable individuals to communicate their values to others. The effectiveness of these signals depends on their recognizability and social meaning. For example, certain products have become widely associated with sustainability, making them powerful tools for signaling environmental consciousness (Shen, 2024). This visibility is further amplified by social media, where individuals can share and showcase their sustainable behaviors to a broader audience. As a result, sustainable consumption becomes not only a personal choice but also a public performance. This mechanism reinforces the role of visibility in shaping consumer behavior (Ristanti, 2025). Social comparison and signaling theory provide additional insight into how conspicuous conservation operates. Consumers often evaluate their own behavior in relation to others, using visible cues to assess social standing and group belonging. Sustainable choices can therefore serve as a basis for comparison, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others. The influence of cultural and social contexts also plays a significant role in shaping these mechanisms (Nie et al., 2021). In some societies, sustainability is highly valued and associated with status, while in others it may carry less social significance. Cultural norms and social expectations determine how sustainable

behaviors are interpreted and rewarded. These contextual factors highlight that conspicuous conservation is not universal but varies across different environments (Anjorin et al., 2024). Understanding these mechanisms is essential for analyzing the social dynamics of sustainable consumption.

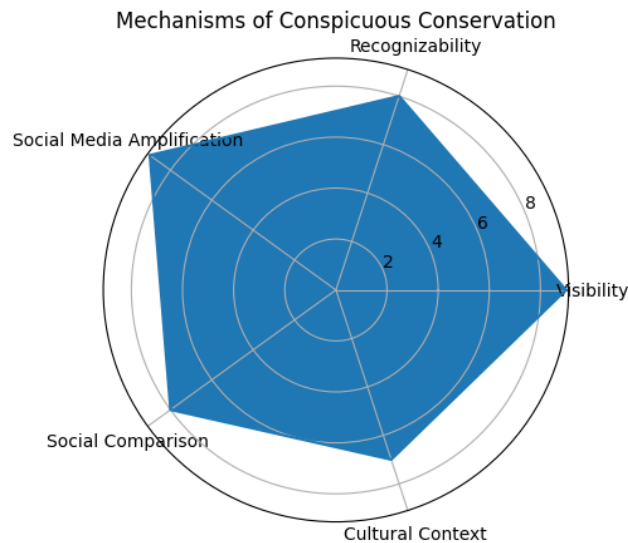


Figure 1. Mechanisms of Conspicuous Conservation

The radar chart illustrates the relative importance of the key mechanisms driving conspicuous conservation, highlighting how different factors contribute to the signaling power of sustainable consumption. Visibility and social media amplification emerge as the most prominent dimensions, emphasizing that sustainable behaviors are most effective as signals when they are observable and widely shared. Recognizability and social comparison also show strong influence, indicating that consumers rely on commonly understood symbols of sustainability and compare their behaviors with others to assess social standing (Panda et al., 2020). Cultural context, while slightly lower, remains an important factor, as it shapes how sustainable actions are interpreted and valued across different societies. The overall shape of the chart suggests a balanced yet interconnected system, where multiple mechanisms work together to reinforce the social signaling function of sustainability. This visualization underscores that conspicuous conservation is not driven by a single factor but by a combination of visibility, social dynamics, and cultural influences (Alam & Alam, 2025). Ultimately, it highlights the importance for marketers to consider these interacting elements when designing strategies that leverage sustainable consumption as a form of identity and status signaling.

Moderating Factors

Several moderating factors influence how consumers engage in conspicuous conservation and how their behavior is perceived by others. One key factor is income and access to sustainable goods, as many eco-friendly products are often priced at a premium. Higher-income consumers are more likely to afford these products and use them as status signals, while lower-income consumers may face barriers to participation (Lim, 2022). This creates potential inequalities in the ability to engage in sustainable consumption. As a result, sustainability can become associated with privilege and exclusivity. This dynamic raises important questions about inclusivity and fairness in sustainable markets. Addressing these disparities is essential for promoting broader adoption of sustainable practices (Gahlawat et al., 2025).

Cultural values and norms also play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior, as they influence how sustainability is perceived and valued. In cultures where environmental responsibility is highly emphasized, sustainable consumption is more likely to be socially rewarded. Brand credibility and authenticity further moderate consumer responses, as consumers are more likely to trust and support brands that demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability (Shen, 2024). Conversely, perceived greenwashing can undermine trust and reduce the effectiveness of sustainability as a signal. Consumer awareness and values also influence how individuals interpret and engage with sustainable products. Those with higher environmental awareness are more likely to prioritize sustainability for

intrinsic reasons. These moderating factors highlight the complexity of conspicuous conservation and the need for context-sensitive strategies (Ristanti, 2025).

Table 2. Moderating Factors Influencing Conspicuous Conservation and Sustainable Consumption Behavior

Moderating Factor	Definition	Key Characteristics	Strategic Implications
Income & Access	Financial ability to purchase sustainable products	Price premium, unequal access, exclusivity	Requires inclusive pricing strategies and broader accessibility
Cultural Values & Norms	Influence of societal beliefs on sustainability perception	Social expectations, environmental norms, cultural variation	Necessitates culturally adapted sustainability marketing strategies
Brand Credibility & Authenticity	Trust in the genuineness of a brand’s sustainability claims	Transparency, consistency, risk of greenwashing	Builds trust and long-term loyalty; requires honest and verifiable practices
Consumer Awareness & Values	Level of knowledge and personal commitment to sustainability	Environmental awareness, intrinsic motivation, value alignment	Encourages education and value-based marketing to strengthen genuine engagement

The table highlights the key moderating factors that shape how consumers engage in conspicuous conservation and how their sustainable behaviors are interpreted within social contexts. Income and access play a critical role, as the premium pricing of many eco-friendly products can limit participation and associate sustainability with exclusivity and higher social status (Nie et al., 2021). Cultural values and norms further influence how sustainability is perceived, with some societies rewarding environmentally responsible behavior more strongly than others. Brand credibility and authenticity are also essential, as consumers are more likely to respond positively to sustainability efforts that are perceived as genuine rather than as greenwashing. In addition, consumer awareness and personal values determine whether sustainable choices are driven by intrinsic motivation or external social pressures (Anjorin et al., 2024). Together, these factors demonstrate that conspicuous conservation is not a uniform phenomenon but varies depending on economic, cultural, and psychological conditions. This underscores the importance for marketers to adopt inclusive, authentic, and context-sensitive strategies when promoting sustainable consumption.

Conceptual Framework (Proposed Model)

The proposed conceptual framework begins with sustainable brand choices as the primary input, representing the decisions consumers make to purchase and use eco-friendly products. These choices are influenced by both personal values and external factors, such as marketing and social norms. Sustainable products serve as the foundation for signaling processes, as they carry symbolic meaning beyond their functional attributes (Panda et al., 2020). The framework suggests that these choices are not isolated actions but part of a broader system of social communication. By selecting sustainable brands, consumers engage in behaviors that can be interpreted by others. This highlights the role of consumption as a means of conveying identity and social meaning (Mouammine & Azdimousa, 2023).

The framework further identifies mediating factors such as identity signaling and perceived status, which explain how sustainable choices translate into social outcomes. Moderating variables, including social context, income, and cultural norms, influence the strength and direction of these relationships. These factors determine how sustainable behaviors are perceived and whether they effectively signal status or identity (Bleier et al., 2020). The outcome of this process includes social recognition, consumer satisfaction, and enhanced brand perception. Consumers may gain social approval and personal fulfillment from their sustainable choices, while brands benefit from positive associations and loyalty. This framework provides a structured way to understand the interplay between sustainability, identity, and social status. It also offers a foundation for developing strategies that leverage sustainable consumption in a responsible and meaningful way (McKee et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the concept of conspicuous conservation and examined how sustainable brand choices function as signals of identity and social status in contemporary consumer behavior. The findings highlight that sustainability is no longer driven solely by ethical or environmental concerns but also serves as a symbolic resource for self-expression and social differentiation. Key themes such as identity construction, status signaling, visibility, and the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations reveal the complexity underlying sustainable consumption. In addition, the mechanisms of conspicuous conservation demonstrate how visibility, social comparison, and cultural context shape the effectiveness of sustainability as a social signal. The analysis also shows that consumer behavior is influenced by various moderating factors, including income, cultural norms, brand credibility, and individual values. Together, these insights emphasize that sustainable consumption operates within a broader social and symbolic framework rather than purely functional or ethical dimensions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by integrating sustainability with signaling theory and consumer identity frameworks, offering a deeper understanding of the social meaning of eco-friendly consumption. Practically, it provides guidance for marketers to design sustainability strategies that balance visibility and authenticity while avoiding perceptions of performative behavior or greenwashing. However, the study is limited by its narrative review approach, which may not capture the full diversity of empirical findings across contexts. Future research should focus on empirically testing the proposed framework and exploring how conspicuous conservation varies across cultures and socioeconomic groups. Additionally, further studies could investigate how digital platforms and social media amplify or reshape sustainability signaling. Ultimately, promoting sustainable consumption requires not only encouraging ethical behavior but also ensuring inclusivity, authenticity, and long-term trust in sustainable brands.

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