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Shifting Toward Quality: How Communicating “Cost per Wear” Influences Consumer Preference for Clothing

Lisa Eckmann¹ | Lucia A. Reisch²

¹University of Bath - School of Management, Bath, UK | ²Cambridge Judge Business School - El-Erian Institute of Behavioural Economics and Policy, Cambridge, UK

Correspondence: Lisa Eckmann (le508@bath.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

Consumers heavily overconsume and underutilize clothing, resulting in substantial resource waste in the fashion domain. As a potential remedy, fashion blogs and small businesses have suggested evaluating clothing based on *cost per wear* (CPW), which divides the total price of a garment by the number of potential wears it provides, thus quantifying its economic value. This study examines the concept of CPW as a potential communication strategy to increase consumer preference for more sustainable (i.e., higher-quality) clothing in six preregistered online experiments (two incentive-compatible). We show that communicating CPW shifts preference from cheaper, low-quality options to more expensive, high-quality options with lower indicated CPW and that this effect is mitigated when consumers cannot compare CPW, intend to purchase an item for a special occasion, or when the high-quality option—despite being more durable—has a higher CPW. Furthermore, we demonstrate that third-party certification in communicating CPW increases claim credibility and preference, and that communicating CPW can be more effective than making general durability claims. The findings are relevant for marketers and policymakers aiming to promote purchases of high-quality clothing and curb fast-fashion consumption.

1 | Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the largest contributors to environmental and ethical harm (Gordon and Hill 2015). Upward-spiraling clothing production and consumption run the risk of undermining the industry's increased efforts to go green (Wood 2023). Between 2000 and 2014, clothing production doubled and the number of purchased clothes increased by approximately 60%, while garments are being thrown away at twice the rate compared with the beginning of this period (McKinsey and Company 2016). Against this background, purchasing not only less but also higher-quality clothing that lasts longer has become an important aspect of sustainable consumption (Bly et al. 2015).

One way to make more sustainable clothing purchase decisions is to consider the usage frequency and durability of garments.

The more often a garment is worn, the more efficiently the consumed resources are used; and the longer a garment lasts, the lower the need for replacement, saving both environmental and financial resources. In this line of argument, some fashion blogs and small businesses have started to advise evaluating clothing items in terms of their *cost per wear* (CPW) when making a purchase (Caggio 2023; Cora Happywear n.d.; First Mile 2019; Donnell 2024; Pontius 2020; Schlueter 2021). CPW is calculated by dividing the price of a garment that a consumer pays by the number of times the consumer expects to wear it. Hence, CPW reflects a hypothetical price paid by the consumer for each time the garment is worn, which decreases with increasing usage frequency (i.e., how often it is worn). CPW is thus an indication of a garment's economic value for consumers, with low CPW (in the extreme approaching zero) representing a better financial investment.

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For example, imagine John who wants to buy a new shirt for work that he wants to wear once a week for at least the next 5 years. When browsing for options, he finds one shirt from a lower-quality brand priced at \$20 and one shirt from a high-quality brand for \$50. Which one should he buy? From his previous experience with the two brands, he knows that if he plans to wear the shirt once per week (i.e., roughly 50 times per year) the lower-quality shirt will last him around 1 year before he will need to replace it; the high-quality shirt will be good for at least 4 years. However, the high-quality shirt is also more expensive, so John should also take the purchase price into account when determining which option makes more sense. Following the logic of the CPW concept, John can now calculate how much he would have to pay for each time he would wear each shirt and choose the one that has a lower CPW and is thus the more economical option—which, in this case, is the high-quality shirt, which has a lower CPW of \$0.25 compared with the lower-quality shirt that has a CPW of \$0.40.

While John's example illustrates the concept of CPW, he differs in two critical aspects from the regular consumer: first, consumers do not necessarily have prior knowledge about brands to estimate their clothing's longevity like John; and second, unlike John, most consumers do not consider the concept of usage frequency during their purchase decision. Indeed, whereas the concept of CPW is intended to serve as a consumer heuristic to avoid buying clothing that will hardly be worn or low-quality items that soon need replacement, in reality consumers typically do not consider usage frequency or durability at the point of purchase without a respective cue (Goodman and Irmak 2013; Mittelman et al. 2020; Sun et al. 2021).

In this study, we examine the provision and effectiveness of CPW as a potential communication strategy at the point of sale to increase consumer preference for high-quality (i.e., long-lasting) options. While previous research on sustainable consumption has examined how labeling high-quality options as durable can encourage consumers' choice of such options (Sun et al. 2021), we empirically examine the concept of CPW as a numerical cue that quantifies durability. Drawing on the literature of unit pricing (e.g., Miyazaki et al. 2000), we argue that CPW reflects a unit price in specifying the cost of each *wear*, which should cue not only durability considerations but also allow consumers to assess economic value. Across six studies, we investigate the effectiveness of communicating CPW under different conditions (evaluation mode, purchase occasion, magnitude of CPW difference between options, presence of third-party certification) and compared with general durability claims. By examining a type of marketing communication that increases preference for sustainable options through economic value considerations, we also add to the green consumption literature focusing on self-benefits as a mechanism rather than sustainability appeals (e.g., Green and Peloza 2014).

Our study has practical implications for marketers and policy-makers that aim to increase consumer purchases of high-quality clothing. Providing CPW information at the point of sale can help consumers assess the economic long-term value of a product and thereby increase its appeal despite a higher purchase price. However, this is effective only when consumers can compare CPW information, and it is likely to be particularly

impactful for everyday purchases, when the CPW difference is substantial, and when CPW is certified by an independent third party. Under these conditions, communicating CPW can outperform general durability claims.

2 | Conceptual Background

2.1 | Usage Frequency and Durability Neglect

When making purchases, consumers weigh the benefits of the purchase against the associated costs (e.g., the purchase price; Dodds et al. 1991). One factor in the cost-benefit analysis of making a specific purchase is the consideration of how often or intensively the product is expected to be used. Products that can be used for a long time before needing replacement compared with alternatives with a short lifecycle not only offer greater consumer value by providing a higher number of uses; they are also a better choice for saving production resources and reducing waste (Song et al. 2015, p. 208). Hence, considering the longevity of products and thus the long term is a highly relevant aspect of sustainable consumption (White et al. 2019).

Yet, previous research has shown that consumers typically neglect usage frequency and durability considerations when making new purchases (Goodman and Irmak 2013; Mittelman et al. 2020; Sun et al. 2021). Consumers rely on readily accessible inputs for decision-making (Feldman and Lynch 1988) and do not attend to, and thus fail to consider, aspects that are not salient (Legrenzi et al. 1993). The typical purchase environment does not provide cues to elicit considerations about how long a product will last or how frequently it can be used, and hence these aspects are easily overlooked, which can lead to sub-optimal purchase decisions and unused utility (Goodman and Irmak 2013; Koley and Reich 2023).

Importantly, the neglect of these attributes has been shown in the domain of clothing. For instance, Mittelman et al. (2020) found that customers who had just made a purchase in an everyday-clothing store significantly underreported usage frequency considerations as a purchase criterion compared with what a control group estimated—despite the fact that purchasing clothing for everyday wear is a context in which usage frequency should be relevant. Similarly, Sun et al. (2021) showed that consumers do not account for the durability of clothing (i.e., how long a garment lasts) and thus spend their money on multiple cheaper, lower-quality garments instead of one more expensive, high-quality garment, thus overly focusing on a low purchase price per item.

2.2 | CPW as a Usage-Based Unit Price

The way numerical information is framed can have a significant influence on consumer choices and preferences (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). Extant literature shows that consumers often rely on the magnitude of the numerical information as a basis for decision-making (for an overview, see Bagchi and Davis 2016). Most relevant to the current research is empirical evidence indicating consumers are more likely to judge price

magnitudes as lower when they are framed as small, recurring expenses (e.g., \$1 per day) rather than as a more aggregate, large lump sum (e.g., \$365 per year) as such expenses are typically perceived as more trivial and affordable (“pennies-a-day” strategy; Gourville 1998).

In a similar way, CPW can increase affordability perceptions of more expensive, high-quality clothing by breaking down the overall purchase price, which reflects the aggregate price over the whole usage duration, into a smaller unit—not by time (e.g., per day) but by usage (i.e., per wear). We argue that clothing is a consumable good that wears out over time and can thus be evaluated in terms of unit prices. The longevity of a garment on which CPW is based can be determined via material durability tests, as conducted already by textile testing services. In line with the logic of displaying CPW, some furniture retailers advertise a rub count of their products as a sign of quality using established standardized fabric-testing methods (Martindale or Wyzenbeek rub test; Han 2018; Just Fabrics 2023). These tests specify the durability of fabric according to the number of abrasion cycles it can take before showing noticeable signs of wear and tear. Accordingly, we conceptualize units as the number of times (wears) an item can be worn before it is worn out and needs repairing or replacing (e.g., faded colors, unraveling stitching, signs of usage on the fabric, changes in shape, holes).

CPW is thus essentially a *usage-based unit price* (Kwortnik et al. 2006) in that it explicitly quantifies the cost of each *wear*. As an additional informative metric alongside the purchase price, it should not only enhance affordability perceptions but also allow consumers to more readily identify high-quality options, similar to policy-introduced unit prices. Unit prices are commonly used for consumable goods such as food or cosmetics to enable consumers to more easily compare options with different packaging or sizes—for instance, price per ounce of cereal, per chocolate bar in a multipack, or per laundry wash load. Notably, the provision of unit prices has been shown to increase consumer choice of lower unit-priced options (e.g., Miyazaki et al. 2000) and to heighten price salience, which activates a motivation to purchase lower-cost options (Yao and Oppewal 2016).

2.3 | CPW Highlights Economic Value

Previous research in the domain of green consumption shows that highlighting self-benefits can increase proenvironmental behavior (Edinger-Schons et al. 2018; Green and Peloza 2014; Griskevicius et al. 2012; Herziger et al. 2020), sometimes even more than explicit sustainability appeals. One effective way to highlight a self-benefit is to point out a monetary gain (Green and Peloza 2014). Although high-quality garments typically come with a more expensive purchase price compared with low-quality garments, they inherently last longer, making them not only the more sustainable but also the more economical choice in the long run. The concept of CPW reflects this value proposition, indicating that high-quality clothing has a lower CPW than low-quality clothing. Accordingly, a high-quality garment's comparatively lower

CPW signals to consumers that they save money in the long run, highlighting the more sustainable option as the more economical one without explicitly communicating sustainability.

We ground this reasoning in affordance theory (Gibson 1979; Norman 1988), according to which objects are not solely perceived based on their objective properties but rather in terms of the action possibilities they offer. Hence, affordances are what an object provides or enables the individual to do (e.g., a bench allows a stroller to sit down and have a rest). Taking this perspective, we argue that communicating CPW helps consumers assess the long-term economic value that a high-quality product affords—that, compared with a lower-quality garment, a high-quality garment can be worn longer and thus saves money in the long-run—thereby increasing preference for the high-quality option.

In the following studies, we examine the conditions under which our key proposition—that communicating CPW increases preference for high-quality options—is likely to be most effective: when consumers can compare CPW, for everyday rather than special purchases, for more favorable and larger CPW differences, and when CPW is certified by an independent third party. We also compare communicating CPW to general durability claims. We elaborate on our theoretical reasoning within each study description. Table 1 provides an overview of literature on the relevant concepts and research areas we draw on for our investigation of CPW as presented in this theory section and summarizes our contribution.

3 | Overview of Studies

We test the effectiveness of communicating CPW in six pre-registered online studies. A pilot study tested the proposition that communicating CPW increases preference for high-quality clothing (i.e., with a lower CPW) vis-à-vis lower-quality options (i.e., with a higher CPW) despite a higher purchase price for each component (CPW, wears) and their combination. In Studies 1 and 2, we investigate the possibility of comparison-making and consumers' purchase occasion as context- and consumer-related boundary conditions, respectively. In Study 3, we vary the direction and magnitude of the CPW difference between options and examine when a high-quality option's CPW is only slightly better—or even worse—than a lower-quality option's CPW. In Studies 4 and 5, we look at when only one option in a choice set communicates CPW and examine whether the effectiveness of communicating CPW depends on third-party certification and how it compares with nonnumerical, general durability claims, respectively. A number of control variables were assessed across studies, and their inclusion did not alter any results (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendices A and C); thus, only the results without covariates are presented in the article. All studies received ethical institutional approval. We report all collected variables, additional analyses, and used stimuli in Supporting Information S1: Web Appendices A–D. All data and analyses are available in an Open Science Framework repository (<https://osf.io/d8rfh/>).

TABLE 1 | Literature on concepts relevant to CPW.

Research	Area	Approach	Products	Key findings
Sun et al. (2021)	Durability	Durability claim	Clothing (sweaters)	Consumers prefer multiple, lower-priced ordinary items versus one more expensive, high-end item (Study 4). Making durability salient by mentioning the word “durable” increases preference for high-end items.
Mittelman et al. (2020)	Usage frequency	Usage frequency prompts and cues (“every day”)	Clothing, durable goods (microwave, monitor, reusable cup)	Consumers overlook usage frequency as a purchase criterion. Prompting usage frequency considerations before decision-making affects choice, purchase intention, and willingness-to-pay.
Goodman and Irmak (2013)	Usage frequency	Usage frequency prompts	Phones, hotels, TV packages, apps	Consumers fail to estimate usage frequency when buying multifunctional products. Prompting usage estimation before decision-making shifts preferences from many-feature items to few-feature items.
Gourville (1998)	Price framing	“Pennies-a-day” framing	Payroll donations, telephone contracts, magazine subscriptions	Price magnitudes are perceived lower if framed as small, recurring expenses (vs. a large, infrequent expense).
Miyazaki et al. (2000)	Price framing	Unit price information	Groceries	Unit price information shifts purchases towards lower unit-priced items.
Yao and Oppewal (2016)	Price framing	Unit price information	Groceries	Unit prices increase price salience and activate a motivation to select cheaper options.
This study	Durability, usage frequency, price framing	CPW as a numerical durability/usage frequency cue	Clothing (sweaters, winter coats, dresses, hoodies)	Consumers prefer a lower-quality, lower-priced item versus a higher-quality, higher-priced item. Communicating CPW increases preference for more durable, high-quality items, highlighting economic value. The effect is mitigated for single (vs. joint) evaluation, special (vs. everyday) purchases, higher (vs. lower) CPW, absent (vs. present) third-party certification and more effective than general durability claims.

4 | Pilot Study: Influence of CPW Components

A pilot study (reported in Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix B and preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/NNB_58W) with 762 MTurk workers tested whether communicating CPW increases consumer preference for a high-quality, more expensive option vis-à-vis a lower-quality, cheaper option. As the CPW concept consists of two components (i.e., CPW itself and the number of wears it is based on), we tested the impact of providing none, wears only, CPW only, and both in a four-cell design. All experimental conditions significantly increased choice of the high-quality option compared with control. Participants perceived the high-quality option as more economical and used CPW-related aspects (e.g., longevity, durability, quality) as a justification for their choice. Because we were primarily interested in examining CPW as a price, we focused on presenting CPW only and in combination with the number of wears in our following studies.

5 | Study 1: Evaluation Mode

One caveat about unit prices is that they are hardly informative on their own—is a CPW of \$0.80 high or low? If the value of a product attribute is by nature inherently not evaluable and if poor or no learned knowledge about distributional information of the attribute (e.g., mean or range) is available, the attribute's evaluability depends on the evaluation mode (Hsee and Zhang 2010). When the product is assessed in isolation with no comparison available, consumers base their decision-making on easy-to-evaluate attributes only (e.g., purchase price); when consumers can compare the otherwise hard-to-evaluate attribute value (e.g., CPW) across alternative product options, they are more likely to incorporate it in the decision process (Hsee 1996). Accordingly, we tested in Study 1 (preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/DZH_9CY) whether CPW influences consumers' purchase interest less when a product is evaluated separately compared with when it is jointly evaluated with a lower-quality alternative. Additionally, we focused on the impact of communicating CPW only (i.e., not explicitly communicating the number of wears).

5.1 | Methods

We analyzed data from 703 US Prolific workers (56.19% female, 1.71% other/prefer not to say, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.1$), who completed a 2 (CPW: absent, present) $\times$ 2 (evaluation: single, joint) between-subjects experiment. Participants imagined shopping online for a winter coat. Similar to the pilot study, in the joint-evaluation condition, they were shown an option from a high-quality brand called Dapper for \$200 and a similar-looking one from a medium-quality brand called Tricos for \$100 (in randomized order; see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D). The brand names were pretested ($N = 100$) and did not differ regarding liking and perceived quality. In the CPW condition, each option included the CPW (high-quality option: \$0.10, medium-quality option: \$0.20) and a text box explaining the concept of CPW. In the single-evaluation condition, only the high-quality option was presented. Participants indicated their

purchase interest (1 = *not at all interested*, 7 = *very interested*) and perceived economic value of the high-quality option on three items ("The winter coat by Dapper provides good value for money," "The winter coat by Dapper is a good financial investment," "Purchasing the winter coat by Dapper saves money in the long run"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.95$). Participants also responded to an attention check and CPW factual manipulation checks (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A).

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Perceived Economic Value

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of CPW ($F(1, 699) = 43.60$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.058$) and a significant interaction ($F(1, 699) = 10.57$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.015$) on perceived economic value of the high-quality option ($\alpha = 0.95$). As expected, in joint-evaluation mode, participants perceived the high-quality option as more economical when CPW was present ($M_{\text{joint_cpw}} = 5.32$, $SD_{\text{joint_cpw}} = 1.42$) compared with when it was absent ($M_{\text{joint_control}} = 4.16$, $SD_{\text{joint_control}} = 1.74$; $t(699) = 6.92$, $p < 0.001$). However, in single-evaluation mode, the difference in perceived economic value of the high-quality option between the CPW conditions was only marginally significant ($M_{\text{single_cpw}} = 4.74$, $SD_{\text{single_cpw}} = 1.61$; $M_{\text{single_control}} = 4.35$, $SD_{\text{single_control}} = 1.43$; $t(699) = 2.39$, $p = 0.08$).

5.2.2 | Purchase Interest

A two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for evaluation mode ($F(1, 699) = 8.78$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.012$), a significant effect for CPW ($F(1, 699) = 6.48$, $p = 0.011$, $\eta^2 = 0.008$), and more importantly, a significant interaction ($F(1, 699) = 9.14$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.013$). As expected, in joint-evaluation mode, purchase interest for the high-quality option was significantly higher when CPW was present ($M_{\text{joint_cpw}} = 4.78$, $SD_{\text{joint_cpw}} = 1.84$) than when it was absent ($M_{\text{joint_control}} = 3.95$, $SD_{\text{joint_control}} = 1.97$; $t(699) = 4.20$, $p < 0.001$; see Figure 1). However, in single-evaluation mode, purchase interest did not differ between the CPW conditions ($M_{\text{single_cpw}} = 4.01$, $SD_{\text{single_cpw}} = 1.70$; $M_{\text{single_control}} = 4.02$, $SD_{\text{single_control}} = 1.78$; $t(699) = 0.43$, $p = 0.999$).

5.3 | Discussion

Study 1 shows that the effectiveness of communicating CPW depends on its evaluability. When consumers can compare different CPW values, their purchase interest shifts to high-quality options (i.e., options with a lower CPW), even if the number of wears is only implicitly communicated. However, when CPW is hard to evaluate (i.e., when it is presented in isolation), consumers are less likely to incorporate it as a relevant factor in their decision-making. One possible limitation of Study 1 is that the number of wears was not included. While wears might be easier to evaluate in isolation, it seems unlikely that consumers could judge whether a given number of wears is

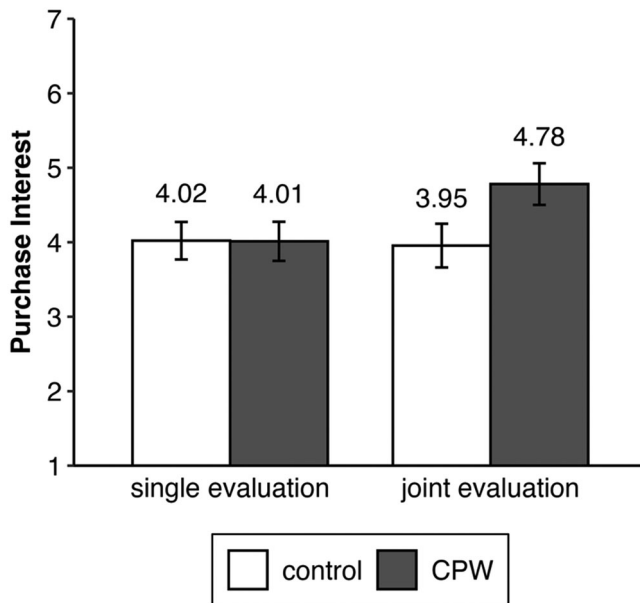


FIGURE 1 | Purchase interest for the high-quality option (Study 1). Error bars represent 95%-confidence intervals.

favorable as effectively without a comparison. Hence, although the effect might be less pronounced in this case, we would still expect it to hold. Nevertheless, we included the number of wears in all subsequent studies.

6 | Study 2: Purchase Occasion

Not all consumer purchases are expected a priori to be used often, so long-term economic value plays less of a role for some purchases. In particular, people think differently of special occasions than of their day-to-day lives, which affects their choices, spending, and usage decisions (May and Irmak 2018; Shu and Sharif 2018; Sussman and Alter 2012). People tend to view infrequent events as isolated, non-recurring instances and are likely to categorize extraordinary purchases very narrowly in separate mental accounts (Sussman and Alter 2012). Hence, Study 2 (incentive-compatible and preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/6NP_N68) tested whether the effect of communicating CPW is mitigated when consumers aim to purchase clothing for a special occasion rather than for everyday life. Additionally, we focused on the impact of communicating CPW, including the number of wears it is based on.

6.1 | Methods

We analyzed data from 528 female US Prolific workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.6$), who completed a 2 (CPW: absent, present) $\times$ 2 (occasion: everyday, special) between-subjects experiment. To make the study incentive-compatible, participants were informed they would evaluate two garments from real but undisclosed brands and enter a lottery to win a 20% discount voucher for their selected brand (we fully debriefed participants afterwards and paid a £5 bonus instead). Participants imagined buying a dress either for regular wear in summer

(everyday condition) or as a bridesmaid's dress for a friend's summer wedding (special-occasion condition; see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A) and were presented with a dress from a medium-quality brand ("brand A") for \$40 and a dress from a high-quality brand ("brand B") for \$80 (in randomized order; following Studies 1 and 2; see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D). In the CPW condition, participants were additionally presented with CPW for each dress (medium-quality option: CPW \$0.80 based on 50 wears, high-quality option: CPW \$0.40 based on 200 wears). We used the same asymmetrical dress for both brands to minimize confounds, shown in its original for one brand and flipped horizontally for the other (counterbalanced). Participants indicated their choice (1 = *definitely the dress from brand A*, 7 = *definitely the dress from brand B*) and responded to the same economic value measure ($\alpha = 0.93$) as in Study 1. Additionally, participants answered two purchase occasion manipulation checks ("Were you thinking about a dress to wear everyday vs. on a special occasion when answering the previous questions?"; 1 = *everyday*, 7 = *special occasion*; "How often do you think you would actually wear the dress?"; 1 = *once*, 2 = *very rarely*, 3 = *rarely*, 4 = *occasionally*, 5 = *frequently*, 6 = *very frequently*), an attention check, and CPW factual manipulation checks (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A).

6.2 | Results

6.2.1 | Intended Usage Frequency

As intended, a Welch two-sample t test indicated that participants in the special-occasion condition were significantly thinking more of a special occasion ($M_{\text{special}} = 6.09$, $SD_{\text{special}} = 1.37$) than participants in the everyday condition while responding to the dependent variables ($M_{\text{everyday}} = 2.40$, $SD_{\text{everyday}} = 1.92$; $t(466.75) = -25.37$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -2.22$). Additionally, participants in the special-occasion condition thought they would wear the dress significantly less ($M_{\text{special}} = 2.69$, $SD_{\text{special}} = 1.37$) than participants in the everyday condition ($M_{\text{everyday}} = 3.70$, $SD_{\text{everyday}} = 1.92$; $t(525.9) = 9.49$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.83$).

6.2.2 | Perceived Economic Value

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for CPW ($F(1, 524) = 28.81$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.054$) and a significant interaction ($F(1, 524) = 9.81$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = 0.018$) on perceived economic value of the high-quality option. As expected, for the everyday condition, participants perceived the high-quality option as more economical when CPW was present ($M_{\text{everyday_cpw}} = 4.59$, $SD_{\text{everyday_cpw}} = 1.76$) compared with when it was absent ($M_{\text{everyday_control}} = 3.19$, $SD_{\text{everyday_control}} = 1.70$; $t(524) = 6.08$, $p < 0.001$). However, for the special-occasion condition, perception of economic value of the high-quality option did not differ between the CPW conditions ($M_{\text{special_cpw}} = 3.95$, $SD_{\text{special_cpw}} = 1.88$; $M_{\text{special_control}} = 3.58$, $SD_{\text{special_control}} = 1.89$; $t(524) = 1.56$, $p = 0.401$).

6.2.3 | Choice

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 524) = 4.77, p = 0.029, \eta^2 = 0.009$). As expected, for the everyday condition, participants were more likely to choose the high-quality option when CPW was present ($M_{\text{everyday_cpw}} = 2.98, SD_{\text{everyday_cpw}} = 2.19$) compared with when it was absent ($M_{\text{everyday_control}} = 2.29, SD_{\text{everyday_control}} = 1.81; t(524) = 2.69, p = 0.037$; see Figure 2). However, for the special-occasion condition, the choice of the high-quality option did not differ between the CPW conditions ($M_{\text{special_cpw}} = 2.76, SD_{\text{special_cpw}} = 2.02; M_{\text{special_control}} = 2.87, SD_{\text{special_control}} = 2.10; t(524) = 0.43, p = 0.974$).

6.3 | Discussion

Study 2 shows that communicating CPW is less effective in increasing preference for high-quality options when consumers buy clothing for a special occasion. In these cases, perceptions of economic value of a more expensive, higher-quality option are mitigated, and preference for it is unaffected, indicating that economic value considerations are not a relevant decision criterion when intended usage frequency is low.

7 | Study 3: CPW-Difference Direction and Magnitude

In Studies 1 and 2, the high-quality option always had a clearly lower CPW than the lower-quality alternative. However, the magnitude in the CPW difference between options might not always be this pronounced, and a higher number of wears does not always necessarily imply a lower CPW. The CPW of a high-quality option can compare unfavorably to that of a low-quality option if its purchase price is disproportionately higher than the

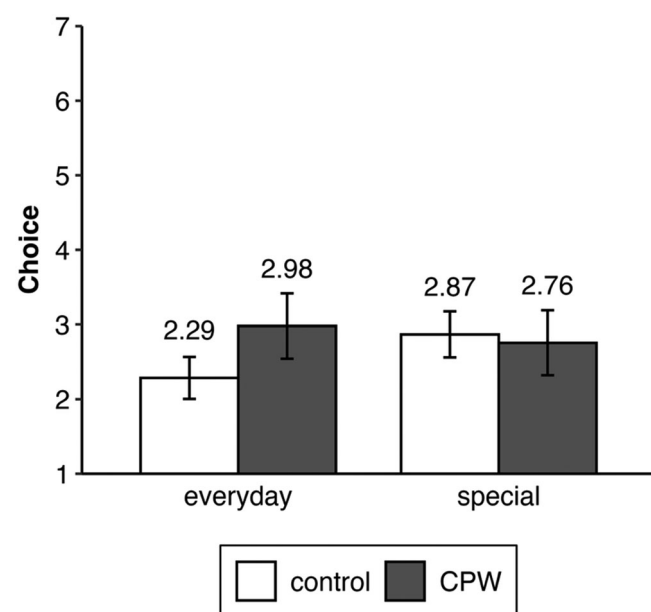


FIGURE 2 | Choice of the high-quality option (Study 2). Error bars represent 95%-confidence intervals.

additional wears it affords. This can result from factors directly contributing to quality (e.g., superior materials, craftsmanship) as well as other sustainability-related factors (e.g., ethical labor practices, eco-friendly production methods), which incur higher costs for a brand that it must offset through higher pricing. Accordingly, we tested in Study 3 (incentive-compatible and preregistered; <https://aspredicted.org/hgsq-k8hv.pdf>)¹ whether consumers prefer a high-quality option more when its CPW is lower (vs. higher) compared with a low-quality option and whether this effect is stronger when the difference in CPW is large (vs. small). To make the study incentive-compatible and increase external validity, we used the real brands Patagonia as the sustainable, high-quality option and H&M as the less sustainable, lower-quality option (Patagonia was indeed perceived as significantly more high-quality and sustainable than H&M, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C).

7.1 | Methods

We analyzed data from 662 US Prolific workers (50.30% female, 1.51% other, $M_{\text{age}} = 43.1$), who completed a 2 (CPW-difference direction: aligned [high-quality option has lower CPW], misaligned [high-quality option has higher CPW]) $\times$ 2 (CPW-difference magnitude: small, large) with an added baseline condition (equal CPW) between-subjects online experiment. To make the study incentive-compatible, participants were informed they would evaluate two garments from real brands and enter a lottery to win a voucher for their preferred brand (we fully debriefed participants afterwards and paid a £5 bonus instead). Participants then read about an independent organization testing clothing of known brands for durability to help consumers make more informed choices. Participants briefly learned about the concept of CPW (including a comprehension question) and were then presented with two similar-looking black hoodies next to each other, one from Patagonia for \$80 and one from H&M for \$40 (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D). The number of wears and CPW were kept constant at 80 wears and \$0.50 in all conditions for H&M but varied depending on condition for Patagonia (aligned-large: 400 wears and \$0.20; aligned-small: 180 wears and \$0.45; equal: 160 wears and \$0.50; misaligned-small: 150 wears and \$0.55; misaligned-large: 100 wears and \$0.80). The values were chosen to keep the CPW differences symmetric across conditions ($-\$0.30, -\$0.05, \$0.00, +\$0.05, +\$0.30$). Participants indicated their purchase interest (1 = *definitely option A*, 7 = *definitely option B*; the position of the brands was counterbalanced), and responded to our previous economic value measure ($\alpha = 0.90$), the green consumption values scale (Haws et al. 2014), control variables, and attention checks (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A).

7.2 | Results

7.2.1 | Perceived Economic Value

A two-way ANOVA (excluding the equal condition) revealed a significant main effect for alignment ($F(1, 512) = 159.76, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.232$) and a significant interaction ($F(1,$

512) = 25.98, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.048$). Tukey post-hoc tests (including the equal condition) indicated that for the misaligned condition, Patagonia was perceived as significantly more economical when the CPW difference between options was small ($M_{\text{misaligned_small}} = 4.73$, $SD_{\text{misaligned_small}} = 1.53$) compared with when it was large ($M_{\text{misaligned_large}} = 3.92$, $SD_{\text{misaligned_large}} = 1.52$; $t(657) = 4.84$, $p < 0.001$). For the aligned condition, there was no significant difference between magnitudes ($M_{\text{aligned_small}} = 5.64$, $SD_{\text{aligned_small}} = 1.64$; $M_{\text{aligned_large}} = 6.07$, $SD_{\text{aligned_large}} = 1.13$; $t(657) = 2.36$, $p = 0.129$). Perceived economic value in the equal condition ($M_{\text{equal}} = 4.68$, $SD_{\text{equal}} = 1.47$) did not significantly differ from that in the misaligned-small condition ($t(657) = -0.30$, $p = 0.998$), but was significantly higher than in the misaligned-large condition ($t(657) = 4.52$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly lower than in the aligned-large condition ($t(657) = -8.01$, $p < 0.001$) and the aligned-small condition ($t(657) = -5.61$, $p < 0.001$).

7.2.2 | Purchase Interest

We recoded purchase interest so that higher values reflect a higher interest in Patagonia. A two-way ANOVA (excluding the equal condition) revealed significant main effects for alignment ($F(1, 512) = 82.50$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.127$) and magnitude ($F(1, 512) = 4.25$, $p = 0.040$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$), and a significant interaction ($F(1, 512) = 25.32$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.041$). Tukey post-hoc tests (including the equal condition) indicated that for the misaligned condition, participants preferred Patagonia significantly more when the CPW difference between options was small ($M_{\text{misaligned_small}} = 4.50$, $SD_{\text{misaligned_small}} = 2.35$) compared with when it was large ($M_{\text{misaligned_large}} = 3.17$, $SD_{\text{misaligned_large}} = 2.23$; $t(657) = 5.20$, $p < 0.001$; see Figure 3). For the aligned condition, there was no significant difference between magnitudes ($M_{\text{aligned_small}} = 5.27$, $SD_{\text{aligned_small}} = 1.99$; $M_{\text{aligned_large}} = 5.83$, $SD_{\text{aligned_large}} = 1.83$; $t(657) = 1.99$, $p = 0.270$). Purchase interest in the equal condition ($M_{\text{equal}} = 4.64$, $SD_{\text{equal}} = 2.22$) did not significantly differ from that in the small CPW-difference conditions (aligned: $t(657) = -2.38$, $p = 0.123$, misaligned: $t(657) = 0.53$, $p = 0.984$), but was significantly higher than in the misaligned-large condition ($t(657) = 5.69$, $p < 0.001$) and

significantly lower than in the aligned-large condition ($t(657) = -4.44$, $p < 0.001$).

7.3 | Discussion

Study 3 shows that participants' sensitivity to CPW-difference magnitudes between options depends on the direction of the difference. When the high-quality option's CPW compares favorably to an alternative, consumers are less sensitive to the size of the difference. When the high-quality option's CPW compares unfavorably to an alternative, the size of the difference matters more; larger (vs. smaller) differences have a stronger negative impact on preference for the high-quality option. When the high-quality option's CPW is only marginally higher than that of the lower-quality option, yet it offers substantially greater durability (e.g., nearly twice as many wears), consumers' preference for it remains comparable to when both options have the same CPW. However, as the durability advantage becomes smaller and the associated CPW higher, communicating CPW becomes increasingly ineffective for boosting preference for the high-quality option.

8 | Study 4: Third-Party Certification

Studies 1–3 focused on comparing high-quality to lower-quality options when both included CPW information. We now turn to examining the effect of communicating CPW when the alternative option does not feature such information, reflecting the case when a consumer compares a brand that communicates CPW to other brands in the market that do not. Consumers often cannot verify brand claims, and their responses to marketers' persuasion attempts depend on the activation of persuasion knowledge (i.e., consumers' knowledge and beliefs regarding persuasion), which can lead to consumer skepticism and result in outcomes unintended by the brand (Friestad and Wright 1994). One way brands can alleviate potential negative outcomes of activated persuasion knowledge is by cooperating with independent third parties that can reliably attest to the claims made, for instance, by awarding a certification label (e.g.,

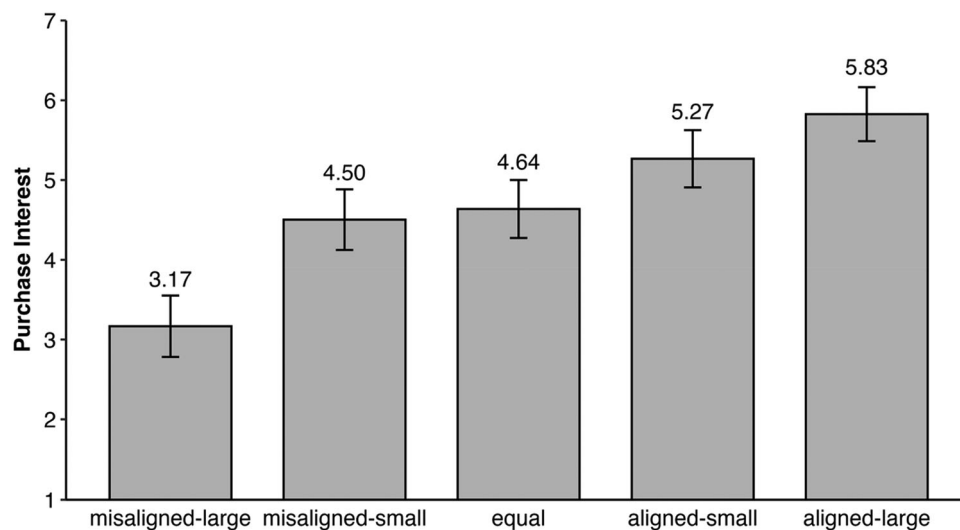


FIGURE 3 | Purchase interest for the high-quality option (Study 3). Error bars represent 95%-confidence intervals.

Atkinson and Rosenthal 2014). Hence, Study 4 (preregistered: <https://aspredicted.org/7nhf-shw6.pdf>) tested whether the presence (vs. absence) of third-party certification increases the perceived credibility of the marketing message and preference for the product when CPW is communicated. Based on the key finding from Study 1 that communicating CPW is more effective when comparison-making is possible, we also included reference values (i.e., a market average) in the brand's CPW message.

8.1 | Methods

We analyzed data from 397 CloudResearch Connect workers (46.85% female, 1.76% other, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.5$), who completed a one-factorial (third-party certification: absent, present) between-subjects online experiment. Participants imagined looking for a sweater online and were presented with two similar-looking gray hoodies from two fictional brands, a high-quality option from Dapper for \$60 and a lower-quality option from Tricos at \$30 (we used the same brand names as in Study 1). Across conditions, the lower-quality option featured a control text, while the high-quality option communicated CPW with wears (\$0.10 and 600 wears) compared with a market average (\$0.30 and 100 wears) in the product description (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D). In the third-party-certification condition, the product description of the high-quality option additionally included the sentence "Tested and certified by the independent textile testing organization TEXTEST" and a fictitious certification label. Participants indicated their preference (1 = *definitely option A*, 7 = *definitely option B*; the brand position was counterbalanced) and perceived credibility of the high-quality option's claim ("Dapper's product claim is trustworthy," "Dapper's product claim is credible," "Dapper's product claim is reliable"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.97$), and responded to a manipulation and attention check (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A).

8.2 | Results

8.2.1 | Perceived Claim Credibility

A one-factorial ANOVA indicated a significant difference between experimental conditions ($F(1, 395) = 4.02$, $p = 0.046$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$). The higher-quality option's claim was perceived as significantly more credible when a third-party certification was present ($M_{\text{present}} = 4.86$, $SD_{\text{present}} = 1.33$) than when it was absent ($M_{\text{absent}} = 4.59$, $SD_{\text{absent}} = 1.36$).

8.2.2 | Preference

We recoded preference so that higher values reflect a higher preference for the high-quality option. A one-factorial ANOVA indicated a significant difference between conditions ($F(1, 395) = 4.67$, $p = 0.031$, $\eta^2 = 0.012$). Preference for the high-quality (vs. lower-quality) option was significantly higher when a third-party certification was present ($M_{\text{present}} = 4.08$,

$SD_{\text{present}} = 2.08$) than when it was absent ($M_{\text{absent}} = 3.59$, $SD_{\text{absent}} = 2.18$).

8.3 | Discussion

Study 4 shows that communicating CPW is more effective for a brand when the message is corroborated by an independent third-party that can attest to its credibility. Third-party certification not only increases consumer trust in the durability message but also directly enhances preference for the product. Hence, by engaging an independent third party that tests and certifies product durability, brands can mitigate consumers' potential concerns about the truthfulness of their claims.

9 | Study 5: CPW Versus Durability Claims

Building on the perspective taken in Study 4, where only one brand in a choice set communicates CPW, we now examine the case in which such a brand is compared with another high-quality brand that uses a general durability claim. This direct comparison reflects a realistic situation in which consumers encounter not only high- and lower-quality options in the marketplace but also multiple high-quality options that use different messages to communicate durability. While both CPW and a general durability claim are likely to cue economic value, CPW as a concrete metric should enable consumers to make a more informed value judgment, as argued before in the theory section. Hence, consumers should perceive CPW information as more helpful for assessing economic value. Accordingly, Study 5 (preregistered: <https://aspredicted.org/8w32-yvcw.pdf>) tested whether CPW is more effective than a general durability claim. From a practical perspective, the comparison should use the strongest CPW message available; therefore, we again included a market average as reference information (as in Study 4, following Study 1) and third-party certification (as in Study 4, but without a label to maintain comparability across options).

9.1 | Methods

We analyzed data from 798 US Prolific workers (55.14% female, 2.01% other, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.19$), who completed a one-factorial (communication: durability claim vs. control, CPW vs. durability claim) between-subjects online experiment. Participants imagined looking for a sweater online and were presented with two similar-looking gray hoodies from two fictional brands, Dapper and Tricos (we used the same brand names as in Study 1). We manipulated the condition by varying the product description below the options. In the durability-claim condition, the product from Dapper was priced at \$60 and featured the generic claim "Our hoodie is long-lasting. We design our clothing for durability. Our hoodie can be washed and worn often before showing significant wear and tear." The Tricos option was priced at \$30 (to match the experimental design of our previous studies that provided a high- and a lower-quality option) and only featured a basic description used for all options across conditions. In the CPW condition, both options were priced at \$60. The Tricos description featured the same

durability claim as the Dapper option in the other condition. The Dapper description additionally communicated CPW (\$0.06 and 1000 wears) compared with a market average (\$0.30 and 200 wears) and referred to third-party certification (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D). Participants indicated their preference (1 = *definitely option A*, 7 = *definitely option B*; the brand position was counterbalanced) and to what extent Dapper's information facilitated assessing economic value ("The information provided helped me judge whether the product offers good value for money," "The information provided helped me evaluate the product's value compared with other options in the market," "The information provided helped me evaluate the product's cost-effectiveness"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.94$), and responded to a manipulation and attention check (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A).

9.2 | Results

9.2.1 | Perceived Helpfulness to Assess Economic Value

A one-factorial ANOVA indicated a significant difference between conditions ($F(1, 796) = 11.28$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.014$). Participants in the CPW condition perceived the information provided by Dapper as significantly more helpful to assess economic value ($M_{\text{CPW}} = 5.77$, $SD_{\text{CPW}} = 1.01$) than participants in the durability-claim condition ($M_{\text{durability_claim}} = 5.52$, $SD_{\text{durability_claim}} = 1.00$).

9.2.2 | Preference

We focused only on the CPW condition to examine the direct comparison between CPW and durability claims.² We recoded preference so that higher (lower) values reflect a higher preference for the CPW (durability-claim) option. A one-sample t test revealed that the mean preference was significantly higher than the neutral scale mid-point ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 2.12$, $t(403) = 5.39$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that participants significantly preferred the option communicating CPW to the option with a general durability claim.

9.3 | Discussion

Study 5 shows that in direct comparison with a general durability claim, communicating CPW can be more effective in increasing both perceived helpfulness to assess economic value and preference. We consider our experimental setup a conservative test: In one condition, the option with the general durability claim was compared with a lower-quality alternative (as in our previous studies), highlighting its economic value; in the other condition, the option communicating CPW was compared with the option with the general durability claim, potentially diminishing its perceived economic advantage. One caveat is that the information provided by CPW was simply more detailed compared with the general durability claim—future research could compare communicating CPW to providing equally detailed, CPW-unrelated

durability claims that also vary in concreteness to more cleanly isolate its effect.

10 | General Discussion

The current research examines CPW, which quantifies the long-term cost for each usage, as a potential communication tool for marketers and policymakers to increase consumer preference for high-quality clothing. Across six experiments, we provide evidence for the effectiveness of communicating CPW when only one or both options in a choice set provide CPW information, across different operationalizations, levels of communication (i.e., providing CPW with and without explicit mention of the number of wears), and stimuli (sweaters, coats, dresses, and hoodies). We show that providing CPW information is ineffective when options are evaluated in isolation or consumers aim to make a purchase for a special occasion, but more effective for favorable CPW differences, when accompanied by independent third-party certification, and when compared with general durability claims.

10.1 | Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Our work contributes to and combines research on usage frequency (e.g., Mittelman et al. 2020), unit pricing (e.g., Miyazaki et al. 2000), and sustainability in the clothing domain (e.g., Bly et al. 2015; Chen and Liu 2023) by showing that CPW as a unit price can increase the preference for more sustainable clothing options as it allows to assess economic value. Contrary to previous research, our investigation focuses on the combination of a quantitative usage cue and the clothing domain as the substantive area. Our research also adds to the literature on increasing sustainable purchase decisions with personal (i.e., monetary) benefits (e.g., Green and Peloza 2014) by highlighting the long-term economic value of lower unit-priced items.

From a practical perspective, our findings suggest that high-quality brands could potentially benefit from communicating CPW directly at the point of sale (e.g., online on the product page) to signal the durability of their clothing and thereby reduce a potential overreliance on the purchase price as a decision criterion. Communicating CPW can be more effective than making general durability claims provided that brands provide relevant reference information to enable comparison-making (e.g., the market average CPW for the respective product category) and independent third-party certification to alleviate potential consumer skepticism about their claims. However, using the CPW concept might be less effective for low-quality or luxury brands—the latter might risk undermining their brand image by emphasizing low CPW, as their customers place less importance on economic value.

Furthermore, the CPW concept could serve as a potential regulatory solution to inform consumers of clothing durability and to curb consumption of fast fashion. We provide first evidence of the effectiveness of CPW as a simple yet potentially powerful intervention. If implemented appropriately by policymakers

and independent quality testing, CPW could offer consumers an objective indication of quality and a quantitative cue for the most economical option, making cheap fast fashion appear more expensive due to its higher CPW. Hence, CPW could stimulate sustainable decisions without explicitly cueing sustainability, which can sometimes lead to consumer backlash (e.g., Acuti et al. 2022).

10.2 | Limitations and Future Research

An important limitation of our research is that all our findings result from online experiments that measure preferences and purchase intentions. Although our investigation includes two incentive-compatible studies, one of which involving real brands, future research could supplement our findings with behavioral data.

While part of this study (Study 2) examined conditions under which consumers prefer options with a higher (vs. lower) CPW, we see more opportunities for further research here. For instance, it is unclear to what extent the preference for a high-quality option despite a higher CPW depends on consumers' attitudes toward sustainability. As part of Study 3, we also tested whether green consumption values mitigate the decline in preference for the high-quality option when its CPW is higher than that of the low-quality option (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C). We did not find support for this prediction but that purchase interest is higher for consumers high in green consumption values for small CPW differences when the high-quality option had a lower (vs. higher) CPW. This suggests that, even though green consumption values were overall associated with a higher purchase interest of the high-quality option in that study, those valuing sustainability are not willing to pay more for a durable, sustainable option in the presence of an unfavorable CPW.

Furthermore, although we found no consistent pattern of annual household income in our studies, financial constraints likely influence the effectiveness of CPW. Financially constrained consumers might still choose lower-quality options with higher CPW because they cannot afford the higher upfront purchase price. This would align with other phenomena observed among low-income consumers, such as opting for high-interest credit cards or loans due to limited alternatives, despite knowing these choices are not financially optimal in the long term.

Additionally, although our research shows that the effect of CPW holds across different everyday product categories, Study 2 emphasizes that consumers' purchase goals and motivations are relevant to the effectiveness of providing CPW. Further research is necessary to examine how communicating CPW affects consumer preference when motives such as status signaling or expressing one's identity are present, which can be highly relevant for clothing purchases, and which likely differ depending on the product category. In such instances, consumers might be willing to pay a higher CPW as a price premium, especially if brand markups inflate CPW (e.g., when the same-quality T-shirt is more expensive for a popular brand than a no-name brand).

Finally, CPW only reflects durability as one important sustainability dimension aside from ethical (e.g., labor conditions) or ecological (e.g., natural fibers) aspects. The effectiveness of CPW was not influenced by the type of materials in Study 1 but was pronounced in Study 2 when the high-quality option consisted of a higher (vs. lower) proportion of the synthetic material polyester (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C). Consumers might associate synthetic materials with higher durability and might be willing to accept the environmental impact of such materials in exchange for their longevity (similar to and consistent with the sustainability-liability hypothesis, see Luchs et al. 2010). Further research is needed to examine consumers' potential perceived trade-off between durability and ecological considerations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data and analyses are available in an Open Science Framework repository (<https://osf.io/d8rfh/>).

Endnotes

¹We also tested whether consumers high (vs. low) in green consumption values are more likely to prefer the high-quality option even when its CPW compares unfavorably to that of the low-quality option. We elaborate on this in the general discussion.

²A cross-condition comparison is misleading here, as any difference in means would be driven by the price of the alternative in the durability-claim condition—the smaller the price gap between the options, the higher the preference for the durable option; the more likely a significant difference between conditions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.
Supporting information.