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Sustainable Fashion Consumption: An Extended Theory of Planned Behavior

Samantha Miker and Srikant Manchiraju
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Abstract

This study examines consumers’ perceptions of sustainable consumption with regards to fashion. In this study, sustainable consumption is defined as the purchasing of goods and services that meet one’s basic needs and increase one’s quality of life while using minimal resources so that the needs of future generations are not jeopardized due to the destruction of the environment (Dolan, 2002). Fashion production has been proven to have a significant negative impact on the environment, and this study is an effort to understand what makes the consumer purchase sustainable fashion products. This study expands the TPB to include perceived self-identity, perceived ethical obligation, and availability of sustainable fashion products to gain a more comprehensive understanding of consumers’ behavioral intention towards the purchase of these products. The findings of this study may be used to increase demand for sustainable fashion as well as the demand for sustainable consumption across the market in general and in effect, diminishing the environmental impact of fashion products.

Background

Environmental sustainability, and by extent, sustainable consumption, has become a trend among popular media directed at young, hip adults (e.g., BuzzFeeD, NPR, Vice, refinery29), brands (e.g., Chipotle, Hewlett-Packard, Unilever, Seventh Generation, Patagonia, Nissan, Nike, Walmart) and researchers (e.g., Rasmussen, 2013, Lehner, 2015, Laebs, Philippa & Hill, 2015, McDonagh & Martin, 2015) alike. This is largely due to the relatively new awareness of overconsumption of Western societies, which is depleting the world’s natural resources and harming the environment (e.g., Huang & Rust, 2012).

Overconsumption exists across multiple industries, from food to energy. Fashion is a trillion-dollar global industry (Textiles Intelligence, 2015), and due to globalization, it is possible to produce clothing at increasingly lower prices that cause many consumers to consider these products disposable (Claudio, 2007). This process of overconsumption, dubbed “fast fashion,” has a significant negative impact on the environment in regards to raw material production, manufacturing, distribution, and retailing.

In accordance with current trends in environmental sustainability, sustainable fashion has amassed attention from its practitioners and scholars. Brands like Nike, Marks & Spencer, Timberland, and H&M have moved to utilize reused and recycled material techniques as well as organic production of textiles in their products (e.g., DeBrito, Carbone, and Blanquart, 2008). This industry move has proved to be lucrative, with sales of organic cotton textiles growing annually (Husvetd and Dickson, 2009). Thus, for apparel production firms, being sustainable is a potential strategy for gaining advantage in the industry’s competitive market. However, in order to take advantage of this strategy, a comprehensive understanding of consumers’ purchase decision factors is necessary.

The present study extends the existing Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) to explore consumers’ behavioral purchase intentions toward sustainable fashion.

Perceived behavioral control

Environmental sustainability, and by extent, sustainable consumption, has become a trend among popular media directed at young, hip adults (e.g., BuzzFeeD, NPR, Vice, refinery29), brands (e.g., Chipotle, Hewlett-Packard, Unilever, Seventh Generation, Patagonia, Nissan, Nike, Walmart) and researchers (e.g., Rasmussen, 2013, Lehner, 2015, Laebs, Philippa & Hill, 2015, McDonagh & Martin, 2015) alike. This is largely due to the relatively new awareness of overconsumption of Western societies, which is depleting the world’s natural resources and harming the environment (e.g., Huang & Rust, 2012).

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Perceived behavioral control

Within the framework of the TPB, beliefs are defined as an individual’s evaluation of the consequences of a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1985). According to the TPB a favorable belief towards a certain behavior yields a positive behavioral intention to complete that behavior. For example,, Pals and Singer (2015) reported a positive correlation between attitude and behavior intentions toward birth control usage. Additionally, Pals and Singer (2015) found beliefs corresponding to appreciation of global-warming consequences positively affected energy saving behaviors among college students. Thus, H1: An individual’s beliefs about sustainable consumption positively affect one’s attitude toward sustainable fashion consumption, is proposed.

Subjective norm

Subjective norm refers to an individual’s perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1985). According to the TPB, perceived social pressure to engage in a certain behavior from significant others yields a positive behavioral intention to engage in the behavior in question. Subjective norms have been found to have a significant effect on sustainable consumption, including organic food choices, (e.g., Vermier & Verbeke, 2008; Padel & Foster, 2005; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992), use of public transportation (e.g., Heath & Gifford, 2003), energy saving behaviors (e.g., Gadenne et al., 2011), and environmental activism (e.g., Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008). Based upon the preceding literature, H2: An individual’s social norms towards sustainable consumption positively affect one’s behavioral intention towards sustainable fashion consumption, is proposed.

Perceived self-identity

Perceived self-identity is the backbone of the TPB, and as such, is defined as an individual’s perception of the simplicity or difficulty of performing a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1985). According to the TPB, a higher degree of perceived behavioral control over a certain behavior will positively affect achievement of that behavior. For example, Hanson et al. (2015) reported a positive correlation between perceived behavioral intention and behavior intentions toward birth control usage. Additionally, Pals and Singer (2015) found a higher degree of perceived behavioral control to positively affect energy saving behaviors. Thus, H3: An individual’s perceived behavioral control towards sustainable consumption positively affects one’s behavioral intention towards sustainable fashion consumption, is proposed.

Perceived ethical obligation

Perceived ethical obligation has been tested to influence behavior in regards to attitudes toward organic food choices (e.g., Padel & Foster, 2005, Peluso & Guido, 2012), purchasing fair trade grocery products (e.g., Ozcanlar-Toulouse, Shiun, & Shaw, 2006), and purchasing ethical clothing options (e.g., Valer, 2010). Based upon the preceding literature, H4: An individual’s perceived ethical obligation towards sustainable consumption positively affects one’s behavioral intention towards sustainable fashion consumption, is proposed.

Perceived availability

Perceived availability is defined as an individual’s perception of the simplicity or difficulty of obtaining or consuming a certain product. According to this study, a higher degree of perceived availability of a certain product will positively affect behavioral intention to purchase that product. For example, Liu and Kwon (2003) reported a positive correlation between perceived availability and consumption intention towards healthy food choices in assisted-living facilities in Kansas. Additionally, Tarkianen and Sundqvist (2006) found a higher degree of perceived availability positively influenced behavioral intention to purchase organic food in Finland. Thus, H7: An individual’s perceived availability towards sustainable consumption positively affects one’s behavioral intention towards sustainable fashion consumption, is proposed.