

Sustainable Fashion; A study based on the comparison of slow fashion and fast fashion

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ABSTRACT

The completed consumptive deeds in society often cause a great contract of environmental influences. Many consumers are unaware of their impact when they purchase low quality, reasonable apparel items, sometimes referred to as “fast fashion.” The fast fashion business model is based upon economical, low-quality garments, quick production and sale, and high consumption. A sustainable substitute is the “slow fashion” business model, where consumers invest in the quality of the garment and are encouraged to hold onto it longer. The purpose of this study was to understand whether exposure to education about slow fashion regarding its environmental benefits would influence consumers’ attitude and purchase intentions toward slow fashion products. This study used the theory of planned behavior with the additional variables of environmental values, shopping values, and knowledge of slow fashion. The methodology took place in three phases: a focus group, pre-educational survey and educational module to measure pre- and post-education differences, and post-educational survey, resulting in 163 usable responses for further analyses. Results showed that the educational module increased young adult consumers’ knowledge of slow fashion and attitudes towards slow fashion; however, purchase intention did not change. Among the additional variables to the theory of planned behavior, results showed that only environmental values had significant influence in young adult consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions towards slow fashion and that subjective knowledge was the strongest predictor of young adult consumers’ perceived behavioral control.

KEYWORDS: Slow fashion , Fast fashion, Sustainable, Environment

I. INTRODUCTION

Consideration in sustainability has matured over the past several decades and is expected to keep growing as human societies continue to face challenges with natural resources depletion and a growing population. Sustainability studies are all encompassing; numerous articles showing how every field of study can be related to sustainability. Because there are not yet ready solutions for the many global challenges, continued research in sustainability is necessary. Contrary to the concept of sustainability, our current economy is primarily based on growth; therefore, business models are based upon coming up with new and better products and then selling as much as possible. To become more sustainable, there must be a shift in the economy where businesses are more focused on stability than on maximizing their growth. Sustainability is about balance and the way our economy is currently operating is unstable for the environment, therefore affecting people negatively. Sustainability-related issue in the textile and apparel industry is our consumption behaviors. The rate at which humans consume things, especially North Americans, is not sustainable. We have created a throwaway society where many of the things we purchase are disposable or not expected to last a long time (Fletcher, 2010). Our consumption habits have had a profound effect on both our local communities and global environments.

The fast fashion business model, focused on high volume and high consumption, leads to the disposal of large amounts of clothing (Joy et al., 2012). Disposal can mean throwing away, donating to a thrift store, or resale (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2005). Many believe that the fast fashion business model cannot be changed, but Fletcher assures “We created it. We can create something else” (p. 263, 2010). While there will be a transition period as the

apparel industry changes, it is possible to change the apparel industry because it is consumer demands that continues to drive the fast fashion model (Crane, 2010; Fletcher, 2010). Morgan and Birtwistle (2009) found that many young female consumers are unaware of where and how clothing is made, the environmental consequences of clothing production, and how to properly dispose of clothing, which indicates the possibility that increased knowledge might help consumers to make more sustainable decisions. An emerging alternative to the high volume, high consumption fast fashion business model is slow fashion. Slow fashion is an apparel business model that is based upon values and goals that incorporate awareness, responsibility, and forging relationships between creators and consumers (Fletcher, 2010). Recent trends have shown that independent fashion designers in Canada are using the slow fashion business model to further differentiate themselves from the increasingly popular fast fashion retailers (Leslie, Brail, & Hunt, 2014). The term “slow fashion” has developed recently, yet the concept is based upon returning to a time when the consumer knew who made their clothes and had a greater awareness of where their clothing came from. Because slow fashion is an emerging business model, there are few academic studies in this area and consumers may not have the knowledge of its environmental benefits or know where to shop for this type of clothing. Pookulangara and Shepard (2012), in an exploratory study in which young adult consumers were interviewed in the Southwestern United States, found that young adult consumers viewed slow fashion as an ideal lifestyle that they would work towards but felt they could not currently afford it. Respondents in their study did not feel that they had enough knowledge to make an ethical decision. Slow fashion is a sustainable alternative to fast fashion because consumers are encouraged to hold onto their clothing longer and develop an emotional attachment to it, therefore disposing of less clothing over time. By examining whether, and to what extent, consumers understand the benefits of slow fashion and the environmental impact of fast fashion, clothing manufacturers will be able to more effectively market slow fashion products. If more consumers gain the knowledge of what slow fashion is and how it is a more sustainable alternative to fast fashion, there could be a shift away from consumption habits driven by fast fashion and towards more sustainable consumerism. regulations is given a label, allowing the consumer to know more about the supply chain of the product and the company is able to build brand credibility as the supply chain becomes more transparent (Bluesign, 2013).

The sustainability of the design and development of products has been greatly researched in academics. It is understood that more knowledge is needed in the apparel industry on extending product lifecycle to promote sustainable development (Niinimäki & Koskinen, 2011). Prothero, McDonagh, and Dobscha (2010) state that sustainability is now being seen through a more holistic and global lens, influencing the products consumers want to purchase. Many design models for sustainable products have been proposed, including “Design for Sustainability (DfS), which seeks to embed sustainability into design by incorporating the social, economic, and institutional aspects into products (Spagenberg, Fuad-Luke, & Blincoe, 2010). The way companies communicate their sustainable practices to consumers is very important because there could be a change in materials or increase in price. When Patagonia switched from conventional cotton to organic cotton, they needed to find a way to communicate the increase in cost and the change in the material to the consumer (Chouinard & Brown, 1997).

Consumers tend to be more receptive to messages that place importance on the environmental benefits of materials rather than the negative environmental impacts of the non-sustainable option (Hustvelt & Dickson, 2008; Chouinard & Brown, 1997).

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The environmental interests of the company can trickle out to the consumers, who might only learn of environmental issues through company marketing. Many companies have taken environmental initiatives. It takes into account air and water emissions, as well as occupational health and resource productivity when crafting its guidelines” (Prana, 2014). One important aspect of sustainability is to be transparent and to communicate company business practices to the consumer. Sustainably oriented brands can partner with bluesign and choose to be more transparent with their supply chain (Bluesign, 2013). Each product produced under the bluesign regulations is given a label, allowing the consumer to know more about the supply chain of the product and the company is able to build brand credibility as the supply chain becomes more transparent (Bluesign, 2013).

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III. FAST FASHION

Similar to the fast food industry, the fast fashion business model is defined by high speed, high volume, and high consumption. For both food and fashion, “fast” does not just refer to the speed, it is an economic tool used to increase product and grow profit (Fletcher, 2010). “Fast” also refers to the rate of disposal as these products are designed with the intention that they will only last 10 washes (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chang, 2012). With this in mind, designers focus on making these items on trend and spend less consideration on the quality of the fabric or the construction, which allows price points of fast fashion products to be kept very low. There is quick turnover, leaving consumers with very little guilt about their purchases and the later disposal of these products (Joy et al., 2012). What many fast fashion consumers do not realize is the passivity of their fashion purchases; they are not connecting with the garment or the process in which the product made. There is no interaction with the maker or the process of creating the garment, leaving disappointment, and then disappointment again with the disposal of clothing when consumers grow tired of the clothing or it is no longer on trend (Fletcher, 2008).

3.1 Fast Fashion Brands:

Many brands have chosen to operate on this fast fashion business model such as H&M, Zara, Forever 21, Uniqlo, and Joe Fresh. The fast fashion business model practiced by these companies leaves consumers with little or no emotional connection to their garments as they are mainly focusing on what is new and on trend at low prices (Fletcher, 2008). Consumers are left unaware of the negative

environmental impact of their decisions to shop at these stores or that there is an alternative option for them. Fast fashion brands keep price points very low.

3.2 Consumer Characteristics:

The fast fashion consumer can also experience barriers to pro-environmental consumption. The consumer may not have enough knowledge to know where to shop for environmental products and may not feel that it is urgent enough to do the research. Environmental degradation is gradual and consumers tend to feel that there will always be time to find a solution. In a blog study on motivational drivers of avoidance, Kim, Choo, and Yoon (2012) found that there are consumers that avoid fast fashion retailers because of its environmental impacts and low quality. Institutional factors, such as lack of infrastructure, can be also barriers for pro-environmental behavior. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) found that economic factors play a huge role in consumers’ decisions and there is a lack in understanding of consumers purchase intentions toward sustainable products and how they actually spend their money.

3.3 Environmental impact of fast fashion:

There is an unmistakable correlation between increased textile and clothing waste and fast fashion (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). Fast fashion consumers feel little guilt about the disposal of these items, mostly because of the low price point at which they purchased them and the same low price point for buying new clothing. Many fast fashion consumers choose to discard their clothing because they have grown tired of the look, not because the clothing is worn out or at the end of its useful life (Fletcher, 2008). Fast fashion items are designed with a short lifecycle and little emphasis on quality. Consumers are discarding clothing at a higher rate than before because it has become easy to purchase cheap, on-trend clothing from fast-fashion retailers (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). A great deal of energy is used to create these garments but they have a shorter life span where the least expensive option is often to just buy new instead of repairing worn clothes (Wanders, 2009).

This fast fashion business model has existed partially because disposal costs are externalized and consumers are not affected (Cooper, 2005). Externalized costs mean that individual consumers do not feel the costs in their wallets, rather costs are seen through increased damage to the environment and the depletion of natural resources due to the supply chain demands (Fletcher, 2010 p. 261). The true cost of something includes the combination of social, environmental and financial costs (Shedroff, 2009). Fast fashion clothing products are not easily

recyclable because they tend to have a synthetic nature (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). One option for disposal is to take items to a thrift store; however, thrift stores are now receiving so many donations that they have excess clothing that they will not be able to sell. This increased awareness is one of the core values of slow fashion, a sustainable alternative to fast fashion.

IV. SLOW FASHION

The term “slow fashion” arose from the slow food movement that began with a group of Italian activists who were used to long meals and a regionalized cuisine as a response to the expanding fast food movement (Fletcher, 2010). “Slow food began as the defense of the quiet material pleasures of cooking and eating and has since grown into a vehicle for reconnecting to the communities and bioregions through the food on their plates” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 261). Strauss and Fuad-Luke (2008) created a set of principles for slow design, which can be applied to fashion design, product design, or any other type of design. These principles were created to serve as a tool or as a guide, not absolute truths. The first principle is to reveal materials or processes that have been forgotten, for instance local manufacturing. The second principle is to expand beyond perceived functionalities; this could be to reuse a garment in a different way from originally intended. The third principle is effective consumption, which can be seen as the consumer thinking about their true needs before purchasing. The fourth principle is to engage across the supply chain, meaning that the end consumer would understand more about the supply chain for example, the agricultural processes that produced the cotton. The fifth principle is to encourage participation from users, where the consumer could help to create the garment. The sixth and last principle is to evolve and adapt to changes environments and systems over time, meaning that processes should constantly evolve to become more efficient as new technology is developed. This principle also relates to the durability of these products, as that are intended to last a long time and evolve as trends change. These principles guide the design and development process, encouraging designers and consumers to think differently about the clothing they wear and to reconnect with an older, simpler way of living (Strauss & Fuad-Luke, 2008). These principles can be applied to the textile and apparel industry in various ways. Different ways of manufacturing garments can be revealed and applied to modern designs. Clothing items can expand past their original function to continue to be used. Pookulangara and Shephard (2013) proposed a

slow fashion process across the design, production, and consumption phases,

Figure: The slow fashion process, reprinted from “Slow fashion movement: Understanding

4.1 Slow fashion brands:

Based in North Alabama, Alabama Chanin employs local women to produce slow fashion products using old world craft, couture style, and organic materials. Garments are sewn by hand and seamstresses are prepared with lessons of mindfulness and are told they should love their thread to help the consumer create an emotional bond with the garments (Fletcher, 2008). The prices of Alabama Chanin’s garments range from a few hundred to a few thousand depending on the amount of detail in the garment. The company also has several DIY options for clothing and housewares (Alabama Chanin, 2015).

4.2 Consumer characteristics:

The relationship between the consumer and maker and the emotional bond that a consumer has with a product are key components of slow fashion, and this is possible on a smaller scale model than the fast fashion business model. Slow fashion brings a new vision to sustainable design; consumer pleasure is built from awareness and responsibility, not constant consumption. Because of this increased awareness and responsibility, consumers are more likely to form an emotional bond with their clothing, helping consumers to keep their clothing longer and take better care of it (Wanders, 2009). A component of slow fashion is appropriateness, which refers to making a product long-lasting by making it useful for a long time, which is different from just making a product durable or last a long time (Shedroff, 2009). A consumer will continue to use or wear a long-lasting product for a long period of time and then choose to repair or upgrade the product instead of dispose of it (Fletcher, 2008).

4.3 Environmental impact of slow fashion:

The slow fashion design process is more involved than the fast fashion design process. Clothing is more thoroughly examined for quality and it is made sure that the style is appropriate and will last for many years to come (Fletcher, 2008).

Slow fashion has less of an environmental impact because consumers are encouraged to buy less and dispose of less, therefore not creating as much clothing waste as the fast fashion business model. There is also a great potential to contribute to a local economy because localism is encouraged in slow fashion. A localized and smaller supply chain decreases the need for materials and products to be

shipped across the world, lessening the footprint that slow fashion products have (Clark, 2008). Pookulangara and Shepard (2012) found that the slow fashion consumer is typically more environmentally conscious of their purchase decisions. The consumers want to invest in the process of their garment and the garment itself. This emotional investment and attention to quality leaves the consumer disposing of less.

4.4 ADDITIONAL VARIABLES

4.1.1 Shopping values:

Shopping values are often divided into utilitarian and hedonic values for describing shopping's rewards. The utilitarian values are more often related to shopping as a chore or an errand. With utilitarian shopping, the consumer is searching for an intended outcome (Babin et al., 1994). Hedonic values are more related to the spontaneous nature of shopping. This is a more subjective and personal act of shopping involving instant gratification, love for the act of shopping, and fulfilling desires (Babin et al., 1994). When consumers shop at department stores or on the Internet, they tend to experience more hedonic shopping values more than when shopping at a discount store because they feel they are escaping from their everyday lives (Seo & Li, 2008).

4.1.2 Knowledge of slow fashion and fast fashion:

Knowledge can be divided into subjective and objective knowledge. Subjective knowledge refers to how confident an individual is in his or her knowledge. Objective knowledge is only what the individual actually knows (Brucks, 1985).

Brucks (1985) states that both types of knowledge likely play a role in consumers' decision-making behavior. These two types of knowledge play into an individual's level of confidence when making purchasing decisions. If an individual has a lack of confidence, he or she might have an increased motivation to search for more information. Knowledge can have a role in sustainable consumer behavior, specifically apparel. If consumers are more aware about the impact of their clothing, then they could be more likely to make sustainable purchases. Kang, Liu, and Kim (2013) found that there is a positive correlation between the consumer's knowledge and perceived personal relevance of sustainable clothing, in particular organic cotton, and the purchase intention. They found that if consumers knew more about sustainability, then they were more likely to purchase organic cotton. This study was done just with the consumer's base level of knowledge; the difference before and after education was not measured. Because slow fashion is a new term, it is very likely that consumers do not have enough knowledge about it to understand the

environmental benefits of purchasing slow fashion clothing. More knowledge on slow fashion and its environmental benefits could lead to consumers having a more positive attitude towards slow fashion products and thus allowing consumers to shop more easily with the concept in mind.

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