

Slow fashion movement and sustainable consumption: Is it an opportunity for local fashion brands?

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Research Rationale and Objectives. The environmental influences of apparel production and consumption have been increasing worldwide. With the diffusion of fast fashion among global consumers, fashion cycles are moving faster than ever. Leading fashion brands like Zara, H&M, Gap, and Adidas are launching new styles more frequently. Mass-produced clothes offered by global brands are sold at more affordable prices, spurring high rates of impulse purchasing and overconsumption. Over-production and overconsumption result in tons of fashion waste. In the United States, each year, more than 15 million tons of used textile waste is generated, and the amount has doubled over the last 20 years (Leonard, 2019). With the awareness of environmental issues increasing, nowadays, more consumers claim to be aware of the environmental issues and be willing to accept sustainable consumption; however, recent studies found that only a very small percent of U.S. consumers regularly engage in activities that support environmentally sustainable outcomes (Naderi & Strutton, 2015). Environmentally concerned consumers do not seem to show a consistent preference for environmentally responsible product choices. Understanding what factors and constrain shape consumers' pro-environmental choices and actions should help encourage, motivate, and facilitate more sustainable choices, consumption, and lifestyles (Alwitt & Pitts, 1996; Berger & Corbin, 1992; Kilbourne & Carlson, 2008).

Slow fashion, a sustainable movement, has started to advocate mindful production and consumption of fashion products. Mindful production avoids exploiting natural and human resources, cares for producers and local communities for sustainable life, and preserves diversity and creativity for sustaining the fashions world (Jung & Jin, 2014; Ozdamar Ertekin & Atik, 2015). Mindful consumption encourages consumers to choose quality over quantity, buy high-quality items less often, and maximize product lifespan and efficiency for a sustainable environment. Mindful production and consumption embrace and promote diverse local brands and cultivate more entrepreneurial fashion brands. It is critical to understand to the degree consumers' awareness of the Slow Fashion Movement (SFM) shape their product choices and consumption. Embracing sustainable consumption among fashion consumers is even more challenging due to the increase in individualism among American and global societies. Individualism drives fashion consumers to seek changes, unique looks, and self-expression. Fashion consumers concentrate more on aesthetics, and expressive attributes, or symbolic value and ignore sustainability factors when purchasing apparel (Naderi & Strutton, 2015). However, for those local brands with a local or niche market positioning, they might know better about their customers; hence, their offerings might be more likely align the collectivistic "sustainability" goals with target consumers' highly individualistic desires for showing

identities, expressing self, or pursuing novel looks. Therefore, pursuing sustainability through mindful production and product offerings might be a great opportunity for these local brands.

To this end, this study attempts to examine (1) to what degree consumers' awareness of slow fashion movement shape their product evaluations, brand value preferences, attitudes towards, and acceptance of a Branded Sustainable Product (BSP); (2) how brand choices (global vs. local) influence consumers' brand value preference, attitudes towards, and acceptance of a Branded Sustainable Product (BSP); (3) if consumers with a high level of SFM more likely choose BSP offered by local brands.

Research Design. Denim jeans have been one of the most popular casual apparel around the world. Because of the high cotton content, indigo dyes, and finishes such as “distressing”—denim is difficult to produce sustainably. One of the approaches to produce more sustainable denim jeans is to use organic cotton. Therefore, current research selected a line of jeans product to design an online quasi-experimental survey. Validated multi-item scales were adopted from extant related research to measure participants' awareness of slow fashion movement (Jung & Jin, 2014), preferred jeans product attributes (Rahman, 2011), and brand engagement (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Then participants were randomly assigned to view images of jeans product lines with a hypothetical scenario indicating either a global brand or a local brand launched this new line of jeans products using organic cotton. After viewing the jeans product images, participants were requested to respond to evaluative attributes, attitudes towards, and intention to buy and share the line of products via social media, as well as the level of brand engagement. All the research constructs were measured using the 7-point scale. A national sample was recruited through the research company of Qualtrics. A total of 408 out of 844 collected responses were considered valid and used for data analysis.

Findings and Results. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the dimensionality, validity, and reliability of all the research constructs. EFA identified two dimensions of awareness of slow fashion movement (mindful production, mindful consumption), two dimensions of product evaluative attributes (functional attributes, expressive attributes), and two dimensions of brand engagement (symbolical value-oriented, expressive value-oriented). An index variable was created by averaging all the scale items for each of the construct measures.

The sample was sorted into two groups based on individual awareness of SFM (high vs. low). A MANOVA test was conducted with product evaluative attributes, brand engagement, attitudes, and acceptance of the branded organic cotton jeans product line as dependent variables, and the level of awareness of SFM (high vs. low), and brand choices (global vs. local) as the fixed factors. Results (Wilks' $\lambda=0.709$, $F=24.99$, $df=7$, $p<0.001$) showed the participants with higher awareness of SFM had significantly higher scores on all the included dependent variables indicating that this group of consumers' product evaluation and selection are more mindful, and they tend to experience both symbolic and expressive brand value. More importantly, this group of consumers is more likely to accept the viewed BSP. Checking the fixed factor influences from brand choice (Wilks' $\lambda=0.876$, $F=8.612$, $df=7$, $p<0.001$) we only found differences existed in

brand engagement. Participants viewing BSP offered by a local brand cared about expressive brand value more, but lower symbolic brand value. When checking if the awareness of SFM affects an individual's brand choices, we did not notice any difference (Wilks' $\lambda=0.9$, $F=0.58$, $df=7$, $p>0.5$), indicating that consumers with a high level of SFM do not favor global brands over local brands, or vice versa.

Overall, this empirical study confirmed that consumers' awareness of SFM shapes their product evaluations, brand engagement, attitudes, and acceptance of sustainable apparel products. Empirical results also indicated that local brands do not have disadvantages in terms of competing in the sustainable product market. Creating more expressive value may help local brands cultivate more customers while offering sustainable fashion products.

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