

## The Effects of Sustainability Perceptions on Perceived Values and Brand Love for Outdoor versus Fast Fashion Apparel Brands

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*Introduction:* Sustainability is an imperative strategy for businesses today. This is especially true for the apparel industry due to the intense scrutiny over economic, environmental, and social impacts of the industry world-wide including the use of hazardous chemicals and non-renewable resources in addition to the generation of significant waste in all stages of production (Kozlowski, Searcy, & Bardecki, 2015). Because of this scrutiny, many apparel brands have implemented sustainable practices in their operations which often affect consumers' perception of the brand related to sustainability. This research study investigates the perception of sustainability of apparel brands amongst Generation Z consumers. The purpose of this research was to compare consumers' perceptions of fast fashion apparel brand's sustainability practices as compared to outdoor brand's sustainability practices by Generation Z consumers.

*Literature Review:* The quality of fabric and construction techniques for outdoor apparel brands typically dictate a longer production schedule than fast fashion brands in order to create apparel designed for longer apparel life spans and therefore multiple wears over a longer period of time (outdoorindustry.org, 2018). In general, fast fashion is priced at a lower price-point, often copying luxury brand trends and themes. Because of the trendiness of the garments and the fast production practices, these garments are often considered to have short-term life spans or limited number of average opportunities to wear. These factors encourage customers, retailers, and manufacturers to focus on the disposable nature of the garment (Fletcher, 2008).

The perceived brand value established the framework for this study. Based on the value creation framework, companies contribute products with an exceptional value may have an advantage over their competitors. (Jung & Jin, 2016). If the customer embraces the value of the brand, they are more likely to show brand love and purchase products. Outdoor apparel brands are typically associated with sustainable practices and thought of as sustainable by consumers. Also, the sustainability mindset possessed by these outdoor apparel consumers is evidenced in their everyday life tasks whereas fast fashion is considered less sustainable (Joy et al., 2015). According to Richins (1997), love can be felt by a consumer after they have an interaction with a certain brand. In order for a consumer to feel love towards a brand, the characteristics of the brand and its offerings must be of a high value to the consumer. In addition, the purchase intention is another important factor related to perceived value of the brand (Leroi-Werelds et al., 2014). Therefore,

*H1: Consumers' a) perceived quality, b) sustainability perception, and c) sustainability practices will influence the perceived values of outdoor and fast fashion brands.*

*H2: The perceived values will influence a) brand love and b) purchase intention for outdoor and fast fashion brands.*

*H3: There will be differences on consumers' sustainability perceptions for outdoor brands versus fast fashion brands.*

**Methodology:** The scales used to develop this survey using Qualtrics were compiled from previous studies. The causal research was conducted to determine how the perceived quality of products, sustainability perception of the brand amongst customers, and sustainability practices of customers influence the perceived brand value, which in turn, then influences the brand love and purchase intention. Generation Z consumers were chosen for this study as this generation of consumers typically shows an interest in sustainability (Greenstein, 2019). Participants were recruited from a large pool in the system developed by a university in the southwestern region of United States.

**Results:** First, exploratory factor analyses (EFA) with Varimax rotation were used for multi-item scales. Items that were kept had to have a factor loading of no less than 0.40 and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.70 or greater. The mean age of the 213 respondents was 20.42, ranging from 18 to 24. Participants' household income was relatively high with 26.3% of respondents earning \$100,000 or more in a year. The majority of the respondents were Caucasian (70.4%) and had at least a high school diploma (52.8%). Multiple regression analyses were used to test hypotheses and the significant relationships between variables were found as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

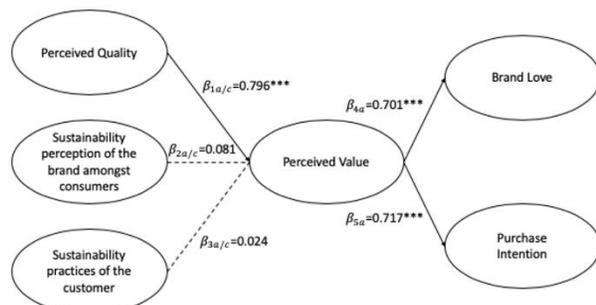


Figure 1. Results of Hypothesis Testing for Outdoor Brands

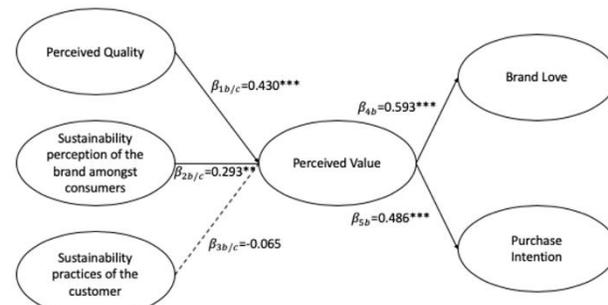


Figure 2. Results of Hypothesis Testing for Fast Fashion Brands

**Discussion:** The results of the study indicate Generation Z consumers' focus more on the perceived quality of outdoor apparel brands than on the perceived value of fast fashion apparel brands. Applying the value creation framework, the value consumers place on apparel is related to the perceived quality of products. As for the sustainability perception of the brand amongst consumers as it relates to perceived value, fast fashion apparel brands showed a significant relationship whereas outdoor apparel brands did not. This could be attributed to consumers valuing fast fashion

brands more if they consider them to be sustainable. In addition, customers' expectations and perceptions of outdoor brands is one of sustainability. The relationship between the perceived value and brand love was significant for both outdoor and fast fashion brands. However, the perceived value had a greater effect on brand love for outdoor brands than fast fashion brands.

*Implications and Future Research:* Outdoor apparel brands should continue to focus their efforts specifically on the quality of their products. The perceived quality of outdoor apparel brands plays a large role in determining the customer's brand love and purchase intention. These companies should continue to emphasize the quality of their products in their promotions instead of advertising their sustainability practices as it they are already perceived to be sustainable. Fast fashion apparel brands, however, should focus their efforts on improving consumers' perceptions regarding quality of their products and promote the sustainability practices practiced by the companies. The quality aspect is a significant factor when Generation Z assesses the value of the brand. If consumers believe a fast fashion brand is sustainable, they are more likely to value that brand. If they value the brand, they are more likely to show brand love and purchase products. This impacts the profitability, value and ultimately the long-term viability of the company. In the future, it would be important to conduct this research study across the country stratifying by the different levels of sustainability expectations of companies and individuals. This would be helpful for marketers to develop advertisements for consumers' sustainability commitment.

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