A Preliminary Study: CSR Advertising, Mere Exposure, and Generation Z's Social Activism in the Fashion-Industrial Complex

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Introduction. The fashion industry, which is characterized by very short product life cycles, globally fragmented supply chains, and primarily trend-based fast product life cycle has produced huge concerns about social and sustainable issues (Bruce & Daly, 2011). Though the negative impacts of the fashion industry have been brought to the forefront, 40% of fashion companies are still hesitant to implement socially responsible practices in a timely manner (*The Pulse of the Fashion Industry Report*, 2019). While Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives are the fashion companies' interest to promote positive image, consumers also engage in the process as they choose which products to purchase. Recently, fashion companies have adopted the trend of launching social justice related to CSR advertising. Because social justice CSR advertising seeks to encourage public awareness and public to doing good, it may be beneficial to businesses *and* consumers. The fashion-industrial complex is complicated but can offer a unique opportunity for fashion companies to encourage activist behaviors among consumers due to its prevalent social justice relevant issues. So far, little research has explored the effects of social justice CSR advertising on consumer activist behaviors while the significant effects of exposure to advertisings are known as the critical factor to explain consumer's purchase behaviors (Bargh, 1992, 2002). In addition, a potential relationship between exposure to social justice CSR advertising and consumer activist behaviors is not known. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate if there is a relationship between social justice CSR exposure and consumer activists behaviors.

Literature Review. Mere exposure effect suggests that individuals show an increased preference (or liking) for a stimulus as a consequence of repeated exposure to that stimulus (American Psychological Association, 2018). Several research has demonstrated the mere exposure effect as the source of influence in purchase intention and behavior decisions (Obermiller, 1985; Janiszewski, 1993; Tom, Nelson, Srzentic, & King, R. 2007). Given the accelerating complexity of media, social justice issues, and consumer environments, mere exposure effects to advertising

stimuli now play an increasingly important role in forming and influencing consumer decision making and behavior. The notion of “commodity activism” is acting politically within and through consumerism (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Consumers engage in “commodity activism” by purchasing items that support their political causes. Based on the theory of mere exposure and commodity activism, consumers with more exposure to social justice CSR are likely to have higher participation in commodity activism (H1).

It is known that most companies donate to nonprofits of their choice to demonstrate positive image of supporting social activism and CSR (Harstock & Ory, 2018). Companies also typically implement CSR initiatives that are relevant to their customers’ concerns. Due to the development of communication technology, social movements are widespread, and consumers have the freedom to share any content through social media platforms (SMPs) including that of companies they follow (Anderson et al., 2018). In SMPs, consumer activists often become a driver for change in CSR implementations since they are active distributors of the content (Ceyhan, 2019). Based on consumer activists’ influence, general consumers may engage in social media activism by commenting, sharing, and using hashtags related to social justice issues on social media. Thus, we hypothesized that consumers with more exposure to social justice CSR advertising are likely to engage in social media activism (H2). Lastly, the fashion industry’s participation in political causes, such as a designer’s support of a political candidate or a benefit fashion show for AIDS/HIV research, may also impact consumers’ participation in social movements as it relates to traditional activism. However, traditional activist behaviors that may include informed actions of boycotts, protests, and petition signing are considered to be outside of the fashion-industrial complex realm due to potentials of higher cost and risk than commodity and social media activism (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991). Also, traditional activism is considered as more “high risk” because of the unsafe situations one might encounter at a protest. While there are different levels of activist activities that one may engage in, commodity activism and social media activism may be considered “low risk” because of their distance and perceived safety. Based on the literature, we hypothesized that more exposure to social justice CSR will negatively related to traditional activism based on its perceived risks (H3).

Methods. To examine the hypothesized relationships, this study employed a quantitative approach, using a survey. The participants were recruited in Amazon Mturk (Minton et al., 2013) and questions were adapted from the existing literature. Consumer commodity activism measures were adapted from Kuehn’s (2017) study *Brand local: Consumer evaluations as commodity activism on Yelp.com*, social media activism measures were adapted from Dordevic and Zezelj’s (2016) study *Civic Activism Online: Making Young People Dormant or More Active in Real*

Life? and Keating and Melis' (2017) study *Social Media and Youth Political Engagement: Preaching to the Converted or Providing a New Voice for Youth?* Lastly, traditional activism measures were adapted from Bale, Webb, and Poletti's (2019) study *Participating Locally and Nationally: Explaining the Offline and Online Activism of British Party Member*. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1= never to 7= always). In order for us to explore mere exposures to participants, we used 2018 Nike CSR commercial and asked the participants how many times they have watched. Prior experience, knowledge, and preexisting attitudes that could be associated with the brand were purposefully included in the study to mimic exposure effect in the real world.

Results. Results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that consumers with more exposure to social justice CSR are likely to have higher participation in commodity activism ($F(2, 86) = 7.36, p = .001$), supporting H1. Results also indicated that consumers with more exposure to social justice CSR advertising are likely to engage in social media activism ($F(2, 86) = 5.74, p = .005$), supporting H2. Additionally, results revealed that consumers with more exposure to social justice CSR are likely to engage in traditional activism despite its perceived risks ($F(2, 86) = 5.89$, not supporting H3).

Discussion. These results have significant implications on the future of social justice CSR and consumer activism. The study expands the understanding of consumer activist behaviors in Gen Z, who are now young activists and consumers within the market. In particular, knowing that social justice CSR exposure *does* make a significant impact on traditional activism, despite the risks, implies that Gen Z is a unique segment of the population that is engaged in activism across all three behaviors. Marketing professionals can better leverage social justice CSR to increase sales and promote social change. Consumers can also gain from knowing that advertisements are benefitting social good.