

How social media type, electronic word-of-mouth, and product price influence attitude and intention to purchase ethical apparel for US female consumers

Melissa Abner, Ph.D., University of Central Missouri; Fatma Baytar, Ph.D., Cornell University; Elena Karpova, Ph.D., University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Background

Sustainability is one of the biggest challenges for the fashion industry, as there is increasing pressure for companies to reduce negative environmental and social impacts across the entire product lifecycle (Kozlowski et al., 2012). Even when consumers are willing to invest in ethical apparel and support a good cause, it is not easy to buy with confidence due to a lack of information (Bishop, 2018). In order for consumers to trust that they are buying an ethical product, businesses must be transparent and convey information in an efficient and effective way that is easy for consumers to understand (Shen et al., 2012). Ethical companies can inform consumers, build trust, and improve transparency by communicating via social media and encouraging electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Transparent information made readily available can also help consumers attach more value to ethical products, making them less price sensitive (Bishop, 2018). The research purpose was to investigate the effects of different types of social media, eWOM, and price on consumer attitude towards purchase and intent to purchase ethical apparel (Figure 1).

Previous research has tested non-digital media usefulness to inform consumers about ethical apparel by comparing the effectiveness of labels (Dickson, 2000) and hangtags (Hwang et al., 2015). However, consumers often use the Internet to look up information and shop online, making social media an effective way to convey information (de Lenne & Vandenbosch, 2017). As of 2018, 73% of U.S. adults used at least one social media platform, with YouTube being the most popular across all age groups (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Sundar and Kim (2005), found videos more effective for marketing because they are animated. Blogs are also a common social media type for ethical apparel companies to communicate information to consumers (Bullas, 2012). In the current study, information delivered via video was expected to result in higher attitude and purchase intention than information presented in a blog, due to videos being animated (H1).

The interactive nature of social media allows consumers to communicate with each other through posting comments, or eWOM. eWOM is positive, neutral, or negative information about a company or product that can influence consumer attitude and purchase decision (Chu & Kim, 2018). Previous studies used Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to examine the impact of subjective norm and attitude on the intent to purchase ethical apparel (e.g., Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). In the digital context, eWOM can act as a social influence, or subjective norm (Seifert & Kwon, 2015). Therefore, it was hypothesized that positive eWOM would result in higher attitude and purchase intention than neutral and negative eWOM (H2).

Ethical products often have higher retail prices than conventional apparel, which can deter consumers from purchasing them (Kozar & Hiller Connell, 2013). Consumers might be willing to pay more for ethical products, but it is unclear at what point higher price outweighs

ethical benefits (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). It was hypothesized that when the price of ethical apparel was lower (\$20 vs. \$40), attitude and purchase intention would be higher (H3). Following TRA, it was expected that attitude toward purchasing will have a positive influence on purchase intent (H4).

Method

To test the hypotheses, an experimental research design followed by an online survey was used. A blog post and video were developed with identical information describing nine characteristics of an ethically made t-shirt (e.g., organic, recycled, fair trade, cruelty free). The same images and text were used; however, the blog had static content participants scrolled through, whereas the video automatically transitioned and had background music, but no voice over text. Following the blog/video information, participants were exposed to either constructed positive, neutral, or negative eWOM comments about the t-shirt characteristics. A gray, unisex t-shirt with no embellishments was presented at a price point of either \$20 or \$40. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the 12 stimuli conditions (2 social media x 3 eWOM x 2 price) before completing a survey. Attitude was measured with a four-item scale (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980); and purchase intention was measured with a three-item scale (Lee et al., 2019). A sample of 891 female U.S. residents between 18 and 72 years old was obtained using Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the effects of eWOM, media type, and price on attitude towards purchase and purchase intention of ethical apparel. The F value for each variable is given and significant differences are indicated with solid lines. Regression analysis confirmed a positive relationship between attitude and purchase intention of ethical apparel $F(1, 889) = 447.71, p < .001, R^2 = .335$, supporting H4. ANOVA and post hoc tests revealed that participants exposed to positive eWOM ($M=24.57$) had significantly higher attitude than those exposed to neutral eWOM ($M=23.66; p = .016$) and negative eWOM ($M=23.14; p < .001$), supporting H2. Positive eWOM ($M=17.13$) also resulted in significantly higher purchase intention than negative eWOM ($M=16.14; p = .006$). There was no significant difference in purchase intention between positive and neutral eWOM ($M=16.47; p = .123$). Social media type (video vs. blog) and price (\$20 vs. \$40) did not significantly influence attitude or purchase intention. H1 and H3 were not supported.

Conclusions

Theoretically, the results of the study indicate that TRA is appropriate for use when eWOM is the source of information to influence attitude (in place of subjective norm). The findings support the expansion of subjective norm in the digital world to include social interactions online (eWOM), as opposed to more intimate contact with close groups, such as friends and family. Practically, no significant difference was found between the

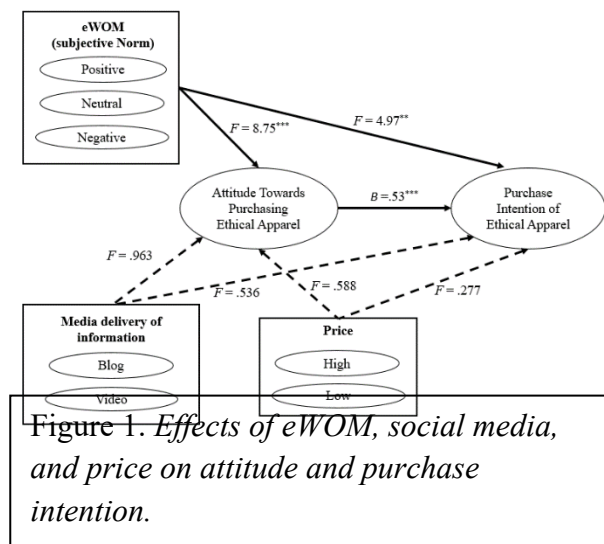


Figure 1. Effects of eWOM, social media, and price on attitude and purchase intention.

high and low price conditions, so consumers might not be as price sensitive when purchasing ethical apparel when extensive information is given and an item has multiple ethical characteristics. This supports previous findings about ethical apparel (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011) and research that consumers are willing to pay more for ethical products (Bishop, 2018). Ethical apparel companies should continue to inform consumers about their products using video, blog, and other social media. The type of media might not be as important as easy to understand and transparent information. Companies should find ways to provide positive eWOM about ethical apparel including incentives, brand representatives, and encouraging purchase reviews.

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