

Environmental Apparel Consumption as Social Consumption

Sarah Frankel, Dr. Sejin Ha & Dr. Youn-Kyung Kim, University of Tennessee

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Past work on environmental consumption has used psychological approaches such as rational-economic, social dilemma, and attitude-behavior gap models (Kurz, 2020) to explain socially and environmentally sustainable behaviors. In this study, we aim to examine an arena often overlooked by sustainability researchers - environmental apparel consumption behavior as a way of social status signaling. To do so, this study builds on the social consumption perspective which explains consumption as the purchase made based on what people think of the image of the product or brand and the image of others who consume the brand or product (Moschis, 1981) and posits that environmentally sustainable apparel consumption can be triggered by such motivations. Therefore, the first purpose of this study is to examine the effect of consumers' materialism, a key driver for consumers to engage in social consumption (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006), on environmental apparel consumption behavior. In addition, growing attention is being paid to the power of consumers' political ideology across various consumer decision stages including need recognition, information search, choices and consumption, and post-consumption assessment (Jung & Mittal, 2020). Similarly, political ideology plays a role in motivations for social consumption behaviors (Kim et al., 2018, Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). The second purpose of this study, thus, is to examine the role of political ideology as a moderator in the relationship between materialism and environmental apparel consumption behavior.

Conceptual Background and Hypotheses: This study views environmental apparel consumption as social consumption in which one's materialism plays an important role. The concept of social consumption is rooted in cultural influences on consumer behavior (Moschis, 1981). Researchers in marketing and psychology delineated social consumption in terms of such various motivations as social status/status signaling, impression management, and conformity (e.g., Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006). Empirical evidence supports the view on environmentally sustainable behavior from such social consumption perspectives. For example, studies showed the need for social status and status signaling as key motivators for consumers to practice pro-social and sustainable consumption (Fifita et al., 2020; Griskevicius et al., 2010). As such, consumers wear environmentally sustainable apparel products to signal their social status, forming the social group that appreciates social and sustainability values and acts on societal concern through environmentally sustainable consumption. If this is the case, it is likely that consumers' materialism, a key predictor to status signaling (Wang & Wallendorf, 2006) and social consumption (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006), predicts their environmental apparel consumption. Richins and Dawson (1992) describe materialism as "a value that guides people's choices and conduct in a variety of situations, including, but not limited to, consumption arenas" (p. 307). People high in materialism tend to be susceptible to the social visibility and acceptability and communicative value of products (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006), and thus, are likely to shop apparel products made in environmentally sustainable ways to convey their

social status. Thus, we hypothesize that materialism is positively related to environmental apparel consumption (**H1**). Political ideology, a consumer's views on how society should work for social justice (Ball & Dragger, 2008), captures the degree to which an individual adheres to a liberal or conservative agenda. Conservatives focus on remaining at the status quo and binding current moral foundation and favor those high in status, while liberals emphasize caring and fairness and individualizing moral foundation more than status (Graham et al., 2009). Accordingly, for consumers who identify as conservatives, the effect that materialism has on environmental apparel consumption may be weak, while it may be strong for liberals. Therefore, political ideology moderates the effect of materialism on environmental apparel consumption such that conservatives (vs. liberals) weaken the materialism-environmental apparel consumption association (**H2**).

Method: An online survey was used to distribute the questionnaire to individuals residing in the United States via Amazon MTurk ($n = 394$). The questionnaire included measures of environmental apparel purchase (e.g., I buy apparel with environmentally friendly labelling or packaging techniques) from Cho et al. (2015) and materialism (e.g., I would be happier if I could afford to buy more things) from Belk (1984), and one question asking political affiliation (Democratic or Republican). All measures were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (6 = strongly agree). Participants were predominately Caucasian (76.9%) and female (55.3%) (mean age = 29 years old).

Results: Hypotheses were tested using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 1) in SPSS 26.0. Results yield support for H1 and H2. First, materialism is positively associated with environmental apparel consumption ($B = 0.23, p < 0.05$, Low Level of Confidence Interval (LLCI)/Upper Level of Confidence Interval (ULCI) = 0.02/0.44). Second, political ideology significantly interacts with materialism, resulting in differentiating effects on environmental apparel consumption ($B = -0.12, p < 0.05$, LLCI/ULCI = -0.23/-0.02) but does not affect the consumption directly. Specifically, the effect of materialism on apparel consumption is positive among liberals while the effect becomes negative among conservatives.

Discussion: This study provides insight into the social consumption aspect of environmentally sustainable apparel shopping behaviors by demonstrating that environmentally sustainable apparel consumption can be triggered by materialism. Additionally, the role of political ideology as a moderator in the relationship between materialism and environmental apparel consumption behavior was confirmed. Fashion brands can capitalize upon these findings by implementing marketing tactics that reiterate what other consumers think of the image of the product or brand. Using customer testimony, offering consumer generated styling tips and actively promoting the ways in which the brand engages in environmental apparel behavior can assist in triggering purchasing behaviors in materialistic consumers. Liberal fashion brands should also consider voicing their political agendas on environmental and social issues to reinforce their ideologies.

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