

Investigating Ethical Fashion Consumerism Practices: Multi-theory Approach

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Although numerous researchers have focused on what spurs consumers to engage in ethical consumerism, a large gap exists in understanding the construction and communication of an ethical consumer identity (Carrington, Zwick, & Neville, 2016). It has been reported that consumers are increasingly concerned about green products and they want to be responsible, however, few actually buy green items (Carrington, Zwick, & Neville, 2016). Moreover, due to the fluid and perplexing definition of ethical consumerism, consumers have different perceptions, understandings and ways of practicing “green lifestyles” (Haug & Busch, 2016). The study of ethical consumption in regards to fashion is even more daunting as many items are purchased not because individuals actually need a new apparel item but for fun and fashionably (Haug & Busch, 2016).

Researchers sought to interpret consumers’ sustainable and ethical practices using various theories including, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Social Practice Theory (SPT) (Jackson, 2005). Jackson (2005) mentioned consumers’ motivation, intention and actual practices cannot be systematically interpreted using any single theory. Therefore to better understand ethical fashion consumerism, we applied SCT, TPB and SPT simultaneously. The focus of SCT is to describe how learning and motivation is formed through social interaction, TPB describe how individual develop certain intention and SPT posits individuals act certain practices based on social norms, lifestyles and situational context (Jackson, 2005). The purpose of this research was to conduct an in-depth exploratory study to uncover the motivations and adoption of ethical fashion consumerism by taste leaders, specifically green celebrities. Since ordinary people tend to make decisions based on what taste leaders have done in similar situations, we chose to investigate green celebrities’ ethical fashion consumerism practices.

Methods and Procedures

Green celebrities’ interviews published between 2014 and 2016 in Eluxe Magazine, a sustainable fashion magazine were selected for analysis. The subjects of these interviews included movie stars, bloggers, and musicians. The interviews were downloaded from the magazine’s website. Data were analyzed using the three stage coding system of constant comparison method. To establish the trustworthiness and dependability of data analysis, double check and peer reviewing techniques were used. A total of 20 interviews, approximately 50 pages, were analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Findings were categorized under three major themes: *perceptions and motivation of ethical consumption*, *developing intention for being ethical* and *means of implementation*. Each theme was then interpreted using the three theories introduced earlier. Celebrities constructed their perception about ethical consumerism through various societal interactions, and learning process, then they got motivated to be ethical, this preliminary motivation turns into intention by peer influence and perceived ethical obligation finally celebrities adopt their best possible choices to be ethical fashion leaders.

Celebrities' perceived green consumerism to include: reducing waste, cruelty free consumption, reducing consumption and buying local. Social interactions, learning process help to develop mental construct and motivation about green consumerism through self-efficacy and ethical obligation, which coincided with the stages identified in Social Cognitive theory.

Analysis of the data revealed that preliminary motivations of being green further deepened to develop intention through: additional knowledge gathering, peer influence, experiential curiosity, and personal inclination. The preliminary motivation described by SCT eventually turned into intention to adopt ethical fashion consumption influenced by positive attitude, perceived ethical obligation, self and social identity. We registered this stage of developing ethical intention with the Theory of Planned Behavior which describe how individuals develop certain intention.

Finally, it was observed that celebrities implement their ethical consumerism mission by their best available choices based on taste and situational context. Frequently mentioned practices include consuming vintage apparel, changing life style, using naturally produced items, and protecting biodiversity. This stage can be interpreted by SPT that suggest individuals make deliberate choices based on their societal context.

Conclusion

To describe the motivations and processes of ethical consumerism, three different theories were employed to interpret three different stages involved into the process. Social Cognitive theory explain the learning stage, Theory of Planned Behavior explain the intention/motivation stage and Social Practice Theory describe the implementation stage. Further study should conduct to explore other source of sample and to quantify and generalize the finding of this study.

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