



Exploring the Effect of the “Sustainability Factor” on Fashion Leaders’ Fast-Fashion Avoidance

RayeCarol Cavender, Min-Young Lee, University of Kentucky; Trina Gannon, Ohio University

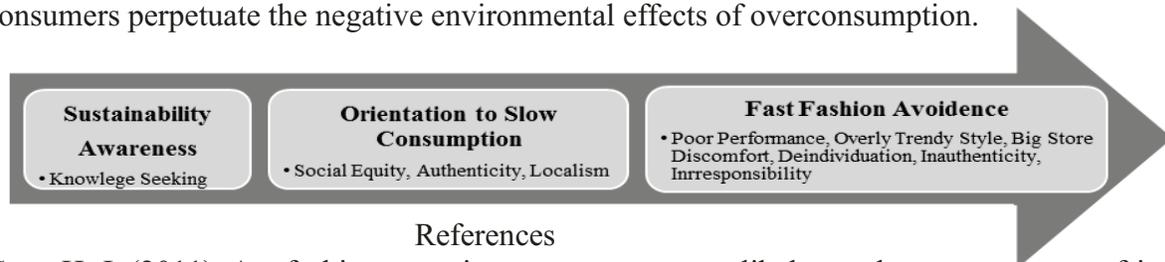
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In recent years, fast fashion companies, to varying extents, have ramped up their commitment to sustainability within their supply chains, invested in R&D for sustainable product innovation, and created internal compliance and reporting standards related to sustainability. More visible to the consumer, fast fashion companies have introduced garment recycling programs, sustainably produced garments, and even entire sustainably produced collections (i.e., H&M Conscious Collection, Zara “Join Life”). H&M’s efforts are particularly noteworthy, regularly praised in apparel-related news and touted through the company’s own brand communication. H&M has also appeared on *Corporate Knight’s Global 100* annual list of the world’s most sustainable companies every year since 2010. While the sustainability initiatives of H&M and other fast-fashion companies are commendable, the fast fashion business model, based on continuous change, low cost, and high volume remains inherently at odds with sustainable apparel consumption. The shift in consumer culture toward overconsumption has been spearheaded by the fast fashion industry. Slow fashion, a counter movement to the consumption practices that support the fast fashion industry, encompasses slow production at the company level and slow consumption at the consumer level, necessitating a shift in the consumer mindset from quantity to quality (Jung & Jin, 2016). The literature suggests that fashion leaders both fuel fashion diffusion and are also attuned to general information related to the fashion industry (Gam, 2011). Spurring fashion leaders toward environmentally conscious consumption is proposed to “encourage its widespread adoption among general consumers” (Gam, 2011, p. 189).

The objective of this study is to explore how fast fashion leaders’ levels of sustainability awareness and orientation to slow consumption influence their fast fashion avoidance. Assuming that students enrolled in retailing programs would report moderate to high levels of fashion leadership, data were collected from a convenience sample of retailing students at two U.S. universities, yielding 520 usable responses. The survey instrument was an online questionnaire consisting of eight demographic questions and 103 closed-ended interrogative questions on a 7-point Likert scale. A research model based on existing literature was developed to test the study’s objective (Jung & Jin, 2016; Kim, Choo, & Yoon, 2013). The “sustainability awareness” dimension of the proposed model included one exogenous variable (i.e., knowledge seeking). Scale items for the variable measured fashion leaders’ current and desired levels of knowledge related to sustainable apparel production and consumption. The “orientation to slow consumption” dimension included three endogenous variables. Scale items for the variables measured drivers of fashion leaders’ orientation to slow fashion, including mindfulness of fair labor/fair trade (i.e., social equity), appreciation of craftsmanship (i.e., authenticity), and preference for domestic brands supporting local economies (i.e., localism; Jung & Jin, 2016). The “fast fashion avoidance” dimension included six endogenous variables (i.e., poor performance, overly trendy style, big store discomfort, deindividuation, inauthenticity, irresponsibility) identified as motivational drivers of fast fashion avoidance (Kim, Choo, & Yoon, 2013).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS graphics version 19.0 was used to analyze the data and parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood method. Reliability was examined through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and the calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients (above .70). According to CFA, each indicator loaded significantly on its designated factor ( $p < .001$ ). The measurement model showed a good model fit:  $\chi^2 (378) = 918.8, p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2 / df$  ratio = 2.43; CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.053). Goodness-of-fit statistics for the structural model were also acceptable:  $\chi^2 (320) = 867.18, p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2 / df$  ratio = 2.71; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .057. The results show that sustainability awareness positively influences consumer orientation to slow consumption (social equity  $\gamma = .68, p < .001$ ; authenticity,  $\gamma = .97, p < .001$ ; localism,  $\gamma = .49, p < .001$ ). However, sustainability awareness was negatively related to fast fashion avoidance ( $p < .001$ ). Variables comprising the orientation to slow consumption dimension positively related to most fast fashion avoidance variables. Social equity influenced overly trendy styles, big store discomfort, deindividuation, and inauthenticity ( $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, social equity did not influence poor performance ( $\beta = -.07, p = .34$ ) or irresponsibility of fast fashion ( $\beta = .03, p = .69$ ). Authenticity and localism positively influenced all fast fashion avoidance variables significantly ( $p < .001$ ).

The findings indicate that, although there is support for consumers' orientation to slow consumption influencing their fast fashion avoidance, consumers may not think that fast fashion is irresponsible. They are very neutral on these questions ( $m = 4.7, s.d. = 1.08$ ). It is plausible that fashion leaders in the sample are aware of fast fashion retailers' (e.g., H&M) widely-publicized sustainability initiatives, deeming these efforts socially responsible while not considering that the fast fashion business model itself is unsustainable. Further, because the irresponsibility variable included scale items on irresponsibility of the fast fashion industry and the fast fashion consumer, it is possible that respondents may not yet be aware of the extent to which fast fashion consumers perpetuate the negative environmental effects of overconsumption.



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