How Does Chinese Consumers' Face-saving Affect Sustainable Fashion Consumption?

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Previous research has shown that sustainable consumption is largely driven by consumers' altruism (Stern, et al., 1999; Stern, 2000). However, given that social norms were found to be more powerful in determining consumers' behavior in cultures where collectivism is pervasive such as in China (Jin & Kang, 2010), we posited that Chinese consumers' orientation to save face (i.e., face-saving) may underlie their propensity towards sustainable fashion consumption. The concept of "face" refers to an individual's public self-image (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which can be gained or lost in social interactions. For example, individuals can gain face by showing behavior that meets social expectations and social roles, and lose face when they are not treated respectfully (Kim & Nam, 1998). In this study, face-saving was operationalized as an individual's inclination to maintain a good public self-image. Because fashion products tend to be publicly consumed (Bearden & Etzel 1982), choosing sustainable fashion products may be closely related to public self-image enhancement in China. However, there is still a lack of empirical evidence to demonstrate whether or not Chinese consumers' sustainable fashion consumption is influenced by face-saving impulses. Keller's customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993) and consumption value theory (Sheth et al., 1991; Sweeney et al., 2001) argued that there are three types of perceived values for general consumer products: functional, emotional and social. For the sustainable products, green value, which satisfies consumers' environmental concerns, was also studied (Chen & Chang, 2012). Thus, this study investigated three types of product value which are generally related to product (i.e., general product value) as well as green value, which is specifically related to sustainable products. We thus posed the following questions: (1) which value increases commitment to sustainable fashion, and (2) how Chinese consumers' face-saving orientation moderates the effect of each value on this commitment.

Many marketing studies confirmed that greater perceived values result in greater consumer loyalty (Zeithamal, 1988), leading to commitment, which is a long-term loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002). Particularly, green value is a type of perceived value provided by sustainable products (Chen & Chang, 2012). Moreover, face-saving oriented individuals tend to behave decently and appropriately to maintain a good self-image in public (Jin & Kang, 2010; Kim & Nam, 1998), and fashion items are a means of improving one's self-image. Thus, we posited that sustainable fashion products would help Chinese consumers better present themselves in public, increasing their commitment to sustainable fashion. Also, the face-saving tendency may play a moderating role in that consumers who are highly concerned with face-saving would be more likely to commit to sustainable fashion for saving face by consuming sustainable items, rather than being motivated by the general product values per se. In contrast, sustainable fashion commitment can be driven by green value in products. When consumers'

face-saving orientation is high, the effect of green value on the consumer's commitment will be greater because sustainable fashion can satisfy both consumers' needs: containing green value as well as saving face. Thus, the following was hypothesized:

H1: General product value (PV) increases sustainable fashion commitment (SFC).
H2: Green value (GV) increases SFC.
H3: Face-saving (FS) increases SFC.
H4: FS negatively moderates the relationship between PV and SFC.
H5: FS positively moderates the relationship between GV and SFC.

Figure 1. Research Model

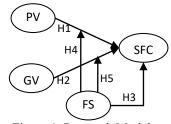Borrowed from previous studies, the survey questionnaires were first developed in English, and they were translated into Chinese. The translated items were tested by back-translation to ensure translation equivalence, and a pilot test was conducted to confirm content validity. College students were recruited by an online survey company in Shanghai and Beijing, China. All invited subjects could voluntarily participate in the online survey. To help respondents' understanding, the survey provided a short description about sustainable fashion and exemplary brands which were chosen by pre-test. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. A total of 503 complete answers were analyzed.

Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two step approach, the measurement model was first validated by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and then Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed to test the hypotheses. For the parsimonious model, mean scores of functional, emotional and symbolic dimensions were used in the general product value construct (PV). Also, we controlled for altruism (γ_a=.10, $p < .05$) and egoism effects (γ_e= -.06, $p > .05$) in this model because these orientations were found to impact consumers' sustainable consumption in previous studies (Stern et al., 1999; Stern, 2000). The model showed a good fit with Chinese consumer data ($\chi^2(284)$= 788.83, χ^2/df= 2.78, CFI= .94, TLI= .93, RMSEA= .06). The results showed that general product value (γ_1= .50, $p < .001$), green value (γ_2= .30, $p < .001$) and face-saving (γ_3= .21, $p < .001$) significantly increased sustainable fashion commitment, supporting H1, H2 and H3. In support of H4, we found that face-saving reduced the effect of perceived product value on sustainable fashion commitment (γ_4= -.08, $p < .01$), indicating a moderating role. However, the moderating effect was not found in the relationship between perceived green value and sustainable fashion commitment (γ_5= 0.05, p= .09); thus, H5 was not supported. The findings manifested the importance of the face-saving concept in sustainable consumption among Chinese consumers. Our findings also showed that the importance of general product value in determining sustainable fashion commitment decreases as face-saving orientation increased, but the effect of perceived green value was not influenced by face-saving. With these findings, managers who attempt to promote sustainable fashion to Chinese consumers can emphasize face-saving related benefits through advertising appeals demonstrating that the product can make consumers appear to be decent people and thus show their good intentions in public. In addition, manufacturers need to overtly signal green value in their products by using green labels so that customers can easily identify and recognize relevant values.

References available upon request