The Roles of Social Acceptance and Sustainable Identity on Young Consumers' Aesthetic
Judgments and Behavioral Responses towards Transformable Dress

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Introduction. Many fashion brands have attempted to integrate sustainable practices into their business. Yet, to fully engage in such practices, brands need to implement sustainable clothing design practices instead of simply adding sustainability to their business strategy; for example, considering transformable clothing (Ma & Koo, 2016), referring to versatile clothing that can be worn in various contexts to reduce clothing consumption (Fletcher, 2008). Despite the sustainability movement in the fashion industry, literature on consumers' perceptions towards sustainable clothing is conflicting (e.g., Connell & Kozar, 2012; Ma & Koo, 2016). Thus, research needs to consider barriers that potentially minimize consumers' engagement in sustainable behavior. Besides those that consumers do not have control over (e.g., price, clothing style), barriers can also be personal (e.g., knowledge of environmental issues) or contextual/social (e.g., social norms). This means that consumers' perceptions towards sustainable clothing can be conditioned by their social interaction and sustainable identity, referring to have social, environmental, and eco-conscious characteristics that people ascribe to themselves (Sparks, 2000). No prior research has examined consumers' social and personal motives on one type of sustainable clothing, here transformable dress. Thus, using transformable dress as the study stimuli, the purpose of this study is to: (a) examine the impact of consumers' need for social acceptance and sustainable identity on their aesthetic judgment, sustainable clothing behavior, and purchase intention; and (b) investigate whether the combined influence of these two variables can lead to a change in the above judgments and behavioral responses.

Literature Review and Hypotheses. Symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) proposes that people strive for self-definitions in form of an ideal self, which can be pursued through the enactment of identity-relevant possessions. Therefore, eco-conscious consumers may make sustainable fashion choices to shape their identity, signal it to others, and achieve a sense of completeness (Belk, 1988). Products can also help consumers to connect with others and strengthen their affiliation motive towards their reference groups (Chan, Berger, & van Boven, 2012). Escalas and Bettman (2005) and White and Dahl (2007) found a strong association between social identity and products; that is, consumers make product choices that are consistent with their social groups to express their belongingness (Berger & Heath, 2008). Hence, identity-signaling motives cause people to consume products representative of their desired reference group identity in order to mitigate feelings of social exclusion (Dommer et al., 2013). Since people constantly look for social proof to guide their own behavior (Cialdini, 2004), social identity may be powerful enough to override one's personal identity. Thus, the following

three hypotheses are proposed. If consumers' sustainable identity and need for social acceptance is high (as compared to low), their aesthetic judgments, purchase intentions, and sustainable clothing behavior will be enhanced (H1 and H2, respectively). Social acceptance (low vs. high) will have a greater effect on judgment and behavioral responses for consumers with a low sustainable identity than high sustainable identity (H3). In addition, one research question is raised on whether social groups based on consumers' demographics (e.g., ethnicity) and the level of need for social acceptance interact to influence adoptions of sustainable fashion, which has been largely unknown in the previous research.

Methods. An online survey was conducted with a nationwide sample of 287 female consumers aged between 19 and 28 years old who possess a college education or are currently enrolled in a 4-year university program. The participants were first presented to the photographs of transformable dress, and then completed the survey including demographic questions and the following measures: aesthetic judgment (4 items), purchase intention (3 items), need for social acceptance (5 items), sustainable identity (5 items), and sustainable clothing behavior (5 items). All measures were derived from existing scales and rated on 7-point Likert-type scale except aesthetic judgment, which used 7-point semantic differential scale. All of the scales were confirmed to be unidimensional with Cronbach's α >.80. Median split method was used to group consumers based on mean scores of sustainable identity ($N_{IdentlLow}$ = 150; $N_{IdentHigh}$ = 137) and need for social acceptance (N_{SocLow} = 145; $N_{SocHigh}$ = 142). Hypotheses were tested through MANOVA with need for social acceptance (low vs. high) and sustainable identity (low vs. high) as the independent variables and aesthetic judgment, purchase intention, and sustainable clothing behavior as the dependent variables. The participants were also divided into Caucasian (N_C = 187) and Non-Caucasian (N_{NC} = 100) for the additional analysis to answer the research question.

Results. Results revealed that consumers' level of need for social acceptance has significant main effects on: aesthetic judgment [$F_{(1/283)}$ = 19.79, p <.001], purchase intention [$F_{(1/283)}$ = 30.74, p <.001], and sustainable clothing behavior [$F_{(1/283)}$ = 35.9, p <.001]. Consumers' sustainable identity has significant main effects on: aesthetic judgment [$F_{(1/283)}$ = 5.26, p =.02], purchase intention [$F_{(1/283)}$ = 7.1, p <.01], and sustainable clothing behavior [$F_{(1/283)}$ = 85.55, p <.001]. This means that consumers with a high need for social acceptance and a high sustainable identity have higher aesthetic judgments and purchase intention towards transformable dress, and more sustainable clothing behavior; supporting H1 and H2. There was also a significant interaction effect of sustainable identity and need for social acceptance on sustainable clothing behavior [Wilk's λ = 0.96, $F_{(1/283)}$ = 8.83, p <.01, η^2 =.03], but not on aesthetic judgment and purchase intention. Specifically, consumers who have low sustainable identity with a high need for social acceptance have more sustainable clothing behavior than those with a low need for social acceptance [$M_{IdentLow*SocHigh}$ = 5.26, SE =.16; $M_{IdentLow*SocLow}$ = 4.24, SE =.16, MD =.02, p <.001]. Further, consumers who have high sustainable identity with a high need for social acceptance have more positive sustainable clothing behavior than those with a low need for social acceptance [$M_{IdentHigh*SocHigh}$ = 5.98, SE =.17; $M_{IdentHigh*SocLow}$ = 5.63, SE =.17, MD =.35, p =.04]; hence, *H3* is partially supported. A significant interaction effect was found for the need for social acceptance and ethnicity on aesthetic judgment [Wilk's λ = 0.97,

$F_{(1/279)} = 4.97$, $p =.03$, $\eta^2 =.02$] and purchase intention [$F_{(1/279)} = 7.3$, $p <.01$, $\eta^2 =.03$]. Specifically, if the need for social acceptance is low, their aesthetic judgments and purchase intentions are low regardless of their ethnic groups (Caucasian vs. Non-Caucasian) ($p_{MD} >.05$). However, if their need for social acceptance is high, the non-Caucasian group has significantly higher aesthetic judgments ($p_{MD} <.001$) and purchase intentions ($p_{MD} <.001$) than the Caucasian group.

   Conclusion. Findings of this study exhibit that personal and social motives are similarly important in shaping consumers' acceptance of transformable dress. Social proof related to this sustainable design option is especially important for the non-Caucasian group. Importantly, findings reveal that consumers' need for social acceptance can override their low sustainable identity, which leads to a positive shift in their sustainable clothing behavior. This study shows that social proof as a form of social validation of acceptable products is a powerful guide to sustainable clothing behavior even when people's own identity is less sustainable. Marketers are encouraged to implement social proof in their marketing strategy through normative information and create momentum towards sustainable products such as transformable clothing.

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