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Sustainability Perceptions and Emotions Related to Fast Fashion: College Student Perspectives

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Purpose of the Study

Many apparel companies utilize a “fast fashion” business model characterized by trendy styles yet cheap pricing and low quality products, leading to unnecessary disposal of usable clothing in landfills. Companies also promote the benefits and positive emotions (e.g., happiness) associated with purchasing “fast fashion” clothing. Although more apparel companies have attempted to promote sustainability in various ways (e.g., use of organic materials; socially responsible sourcing), “fast fashion” is still the accepted social norm, especially among young adults, and the negative sides of this mass consumption are psychologically distant from consumers (Hill & Lee, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this project was to 1) understand college-age consumers’ awareness of the sustainability impacts of their clothing consumption, 2) identify the emotions associated with “fast fashion” vs. more sustainable consumption, and 3) explore ways college-age consumers may be willing to engage in more sustainable clothing practices.

Literature Review and Conceptual Background

Globalization has contributed to the *unsustainability* of the apparel and textiles industries as apparel companies increasingly outsource production to developing countries to incur lower costs. The abundance of cheap clothing in developed countries due to fast fashion has created a throwaway society; consumers purchase things because they are cheap and may not necessarily need them (Fletcher, 2010). Hill and Lee (2012) concluded that more concise educational programming is necessary to increase consumer knowledge related to sustainability. Watson and Yan (2013) reported fast fashion consumers may choose to purchase fast fashion products to avoid feeling guilty of their clothing purchase because fast fashion tends to be inexpensive, which helps fast fashion consumers justify their expenditures on clothing. Although not the emphasis of the research, Watson and Yan (2013) reported that purchases and consumption of fast fashion could be exciting to consumers; on the other hand, Park (2014) suggested that fast fashion consumers might experience the feeling of confusion when choosing fast fashion brands.

Method

Seven focus groups were conducted at a large U.S. Western university with a total of 41 undergraduate and graduate student participants of various majors across different colleges on campus ($M_{age} = 20.41$; 70% female). University students were chosen as research participants because they are the primary target market of fast fashion. The focus group sessions lasted between 60 minutes and 90 minutes. Participants were asked questions aimed to explore their perceptions about sustainability and emotions in regards to fast fashion products and to identify

ways they might engage in more sustainable clothing practices. Qualitative data were analyzed to identify significant ideas/common themes mentioned among participants. The ideas were categorized based on the content phrases picked out of the data. Then the researchers reviewed the list of items and assigned them into categories based on similarities.

Results

Results showed that when asked about perceptions of sustainability in general, most participants mentioned recycling and energy consumption, but no one made connections between clothing consumption and sustainability. When specifically prompted about clothing sustainability, only a few participants reported that they were aware of the environmental impacts of fast fashion, but continued to express interests in buying fast fashion because of desires for trendy styles and low prices. Almost all female participants indicated that purchasing new clothing made them feel happy, excited, and confident about themselves; while male participants did not express emotions related to clothing consumption. Additionally, for those who connected their purchase and consumption of clothing with negative impacts also expressed feelings of guilt. Regarding ways to engage in more sustainable practices, most participants reported that they would be more willing to 1) buy higher quality, more expensive clothes, rather than cheap ones, 2) buy clothes that are produced using ethical business practices, and 3) buy less often; however, they would be least likely to 1) buy fewer clothes, 2) get secondhand clothes from family and friends, and 3) get clothes repaired or mended to help them last longer.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study fills the gap in the literature by expanding the understanding of college-age consumers' perceptions regarding clothing sustainability and intentions to engage in sustainable clothing practices. Findings suggested that female consumers reported both positive and negative emotions related to fast fashion. Confirmed with Hill and Lee (2012), this study further showed that more education is necessary to raise young adult consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impact of their clothing consumption practices. While participants reported that they might be interested in buying clothes less often, they would be reluctant to buy fewer clothes. The overconsumption of clothing among college-age consumers warrants further investigations. Limitations of the study included samples from only one university.

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