Relationship with the Unfamiliar: Extension of Social Exchange Theory as Applied to Unfamiliar Apparel Brands’ Pro-environmental Messages

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Sustainable, particularly, pro-environmental initiatives have been of significant consideration among apparel businesses. This is because apparel production also finds itself the second leading industrial cause of environmental pollution, thus taking a vast toll on the planet (Black, 2008). The past few years have seen an increase in initiatives by both apparel businesses and consumers to reduce their negative impact on the environment. Especially the current business environment has seen a rise of start-ups enterprises that promise to offer consumers with conscious product choices. To aid consumers decision-making and portray their contribution towards betterment of the environment, these unfamiliar apparel brands are connecting with consumers using their pro-environmental their marketing messages.

In this light, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) indicates that consumers connect with brands and form relationships using a two-sided mutually rewarding process involving transactions (Homans, 1958). Research indicates that trust and commitment towards the brand are strong indicators of consumers’ relationship with a brand, which eventually can predict consumers’ intention to purchase from the brand (Chauhuri and Holbrook, 2002). In addition, trust and commitment towards a brand can be predicted by consumers’ shared value with the brand and their perceived benefits from the brand (idem). In order for consumers to fully understand the benefits and the shared values between the brand and themselves, they must have knowledge about the environmental impact of apparel to begin with (Kang and Kim, 2013). In addition, consumers tend to evaluate messages based on their overall skepticism about an issue (Corner, Whitmarsh, & Xenias, 2012). Given the importance of relationship variables in predicting consumers’ long-term engagement with the business and the ultimate effectiveness of the businesses’ pro-environmental initiatives, this study investigates the impact of consumers’ knowledge about environmental impact of apparel and climate change skepticism on their evaluation of unfamiliar brands’ pro-environmental initiatives (namely shared value and perceived benefit), and ultimately their relationship with the brand (namely perceived trust, commitment) finally leading to purchase intention.

A total of 206 adult participants were recruited for an online survey through a market research firm, Qualtrics. Participants indicated their knowledge about environmental impact of apparel products (11 items, Kim and Damhorst, 1998) and skepticism towards climate change (12 items, Whitmarsh, 2011). Then participants were exposed to one randomly selected pro-environmental advertisement from one of two clothing brands identified for this study, namely Jabong and Myntra. These two brands were based out of India with no international presence. 88 students enrolled in a US state university indicated these two brands were deemed unfamiliar, hence suitable for the study purposes. They then indicated their shared value with (3 items; MacMillan, Mone, Money and Downing, 2005), perceived benefit from (8 items; Kuo and Feng,
2013), perceived trust towards (3 items; Hong and Cha, 2013), commitment towards (3 items; Li, Browne, and Chau, 2006, and intention to purchase from the brand (2 items; Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle, and Lee, 2012). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1:Strongly Disagree to 7: Strongly Agree). Reliabilities (Cronbach α) of the scales ranged from 0.96 to 0.71.

Participants’ (51% male and 49% female) age ranged from 19 to 77 (mean = 46.02, s.d. = 15.31). Maximum-likelihood estimation based path analysis was conducted using AMOS. The path model consisted of one exogenous variable for consumer’ knowledge and six endogenous variables: skepticism, shared value, perceived benefits, perceived trust, perceived commitment, and purchase intention. The overall model fit, indicated by χ² goodness of fit index was satisfactory (χ² = 11.26, df = 7, p = 0.13). In addition, other fit indices (CMIN/DF = 1.61, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.06, PCLOSE = 0.39) indicated good model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Participants’ higher level of knowledge led to lower skepticism [b = -0.18, p = .010]. Knowledge did not significantly influence perceived benefit (b = .105, p = 0.135) but positively influenced shared value (b = 0.181, p = 0.008). Skepticism significantly influenced shared value negatively (b = -0.17, p = 0.012) but not perceived benefit (b = -0.062, p = 0.375). Shared value positively influenced perceived trust (b = 0.42, p < .001), and commitment (b = 0.40, p = .003). Perceived benefit positively influenced perceived trust (b = 0.20, p <.001) and commitment (b = 0.50, p <.001). Perceived trust positively influenced commitment (b = 0.20, p <.001) and intention to purchase (b = 0.20, p < 0.001). Finally, commitment positively influenced intention to purchase (b = 0.67, p <.001).

Results indicated that consumers’ shared value perceptions and perceived benefits obtained from pro-environmental apparel brands influence their relation with the brand through trust and commitment, which eventually impacted their intention to purchase from the brand. Since negatively impacted participants’ skepticism toward climate change and positively impacted shared value, startup/unfamiliar brands may invest on educating consumers about the possible negative impacts of apparel to lower their skepticism and perceived value from the brand’s pro-environmental initiatives. Although consumers shared similar set of values with the brand regarding their pro-environmental activities, they did not feel that the brand’s initiatives would benefit them in any way. The results also indicated that when consumers increasingly share their pro-environmental values with the brand and/or perceive that the brand provides them with pro-environmental benefits, they tend to form a relationship with the brand by trusting it and eventually developing a commitment toward the same. Also trust and commitment towards the brand were strong determinants for consumers’ purchase intention. Therefore, clearly focusing on the values and benefits and aligning them with those shared by consumers is a way for familiar brands to create a niche for themselves in the market. Future studies considering knowledge of social impact of apparel products in addition to environmental impact, as well as other antecedents of skepticism such as perceived message credibility might be beneficial.
References


