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Young Adults' Ethical Reasoning concerning Fast Fashion Retailers

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Young adults between the ages of 18-24 in 2016 span two generational cohorts: Generation Y (Gen Y) and Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Y adults were born between 1980 and 1995, while Gen Z adults were born after 1995 (Williams, 2015). Members of both cohorts are reportedly interested in purchasing socially responsible products, even if they have to pay more for these products (Brin, 2014; Ravapura, 2014).

At the same time, however, members of Gen Y and Gen Z represent the target market for fast fashion retailers (FFRs) (Kim, Choo, & Yoon, 2013). In fact, compared to other age cohorts, young female adults were found to shop in FFRs more frequently (Wang, 2010). The fast fashion system is associated with inexpensive clothing that is often produced with a lack of regard for the environment or the individuals who manufacture the garments (Bratskeir, 2016). Due to FFRs' socially irresponsible behavior, young adults' behavior contradicts their desire to consume from socially responsible companies.

When consumers' behavior is inconsistent with their thoughts about a retailer, they will experience cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) explains that, when there is discrepancy between thoughts and actions, individuals will feel emotional discomfort until balance is restored. Following this reasoning, if young adults, who want to purchase products from ethical companies, are purchasing clothing from FFRs, then they need to believe that these retailers are behaving ethically to avoid cognitive dissonance.

While other researchers (Joy et al., 2012) have noted the discrepancy between young adults' attitudes and values toward social and environmental responsibility and their fast fashion consumption behavior, young adults' ethical reasoning with respect to these retailers has not been examined. Understanding the ethical perspectives young adults use to guide their fast fashion consumption behavior contributes to understanding not only fast fashion consumers but also Gen Y and Gen Z consumers in general. The purpose of this research was to identify the ethical perspectives that young adult consumers are using to evaluate FFRs.

Method

A convenience sample of 111 U.S. undergraduates (90.9% female, mean age of 20.4 years, 82.9% Caucasian; 42.3% sophomores) responded to an open-ended question about why they believed FFRs were behaving ethically or unethically. Undergraduates were selected as participants because they represent the age range of interest.

Results

Participants' responses were content-analyzed to identify on which ethical perspectives they were basing their assessments of FFRs. Responses were read several times and categories of responses were created. Because participants were allowed to provide more than one reason why

they believed FFRs were behaving ethically or unethically, each individual participant's response could be classified into more than one category. Instances of disagreement between researchers were negotiated until agreement was achieved.

A total of 61% of participants indicated that they believed that FFRs were behaving ethically. Among these participants, 84.7% indicated that FFRs were behaving ethically because they allowed all consumers to dress fashionably, representing a fairness approach (Paulins & Hillery, 2014). A total of 54.5% said FFRs were ethical because they were financially successful, suggesting that they are using a shareholder perspective (Friedman, 1971). The common good approach (Paulins & Hillery, 2014) was used by the 23.6% who believed FFRs were behaving ethically because they provided manufacturing jobs for less fortunate people in foreign countries.

Participants who believed that FFRs were behaving unethically tended to use the rights approach (Paulins & Hillery, 2014). FFRs were unethical because they deprived workers of the right to healthy working conditions (87.5%) and deprived every one of the right to a clean environment (38.9%).

Discussion

More than half of the participants believed that FFRs were behaving ethically. This belief allows them to patronize FFRs without experiencing cognitive dissonance. U.S. young adults based their decisions on the fairness approach, shareholder perspective, and common good approach. Future researchers could investigate Gen Y and Gen Z consumers from other countries to explore which ethical perspectives they are using to justify their behavior in FFRs.

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