"Buying Sustainable Clothing Helps Me Express Who I Am": The Efficacy of Changing Millennials' Sustainable Clothing Purchase Intention with Online Consumer Knowledge

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Keywords: Consumer knowledge, Millennials, purchase intention, SEM, sustainable clothing, the theory of planned behavior

Purpose and significance. The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of an online consumer knowledge platform on Millennial consumers' intention to purchase sustainable clothing. Millennials (born between 1978 and 1995) are the largest consumer segment comprising 25% of the US population. Their preferences for organic food, natural cleaning products, and electric cars have created a profitable market for sustainable products (Fromm & Garton, 2013). In contrast, Millennials do not consider the same sustainability criteria when they shop for clothing (Butler & Francis, 1997; Carrigan, 2017). In response, ProjectJUST.com was launched in April 2016 to provide consumer knowledge about sustainability issues that arise in fashion supply chains with the goal of increasing consumers' sustainable clothing consumption. This study measured the efficacy of ProjectJUST.com in changing Millennials' sustainable clothing purchase intention and offers managerial implications for similar platforms.

Sample. This study assessed the differences in purchase intention between two groups. ProjectJUST.com users were recruited using a banner appearing on the platform's landing page (PJ group; *n* = 700), and a group of non-users was recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MT group; *n* = 685). Both groups comprised mostly females (PJ group = 93.7%, MT group = 78.0%) from the USA (PJ group = 53.3%, MT group = 82.0%).

Theoretical framework. Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of planned behavior includes three independent variables that can ". . . account for 76% of people's intentions, which in turn explains a stunning 95% of the variance in conservation behavior" in the sustainable clothing context (Kaiser, Hubner, & Bogner, 2005, p. 2165). In their use of the theory, Kang, Liu, and Kim (2013) added three latent variables (shown in figure 1) which demonstrated an excellent fit and quantified the effect of consumer knowledge in the sustainable clothing context. Kang et al.'s (2013) instrument items were therefore adapted, and an online questionnaire was distributed to both groups online. 31 items were measured for this analysis using 5-point Likert scales.

Hypotheses and results. (H1) Kang et al.'s seven-factor expanded theory of planned behavior will demonstrate an excellent fit across groups. The seven-factor structural equation model (SEM) demonstrated an adequate fit and H1 was supported. (H2) Consumer knowledge (a), perceived consumer effectiveness, (b) and perceived personal relevance (c) will have positive indirect effects on intention to purchase sustainable clothing across groups, and will have no direct effects. SEM results did not support any H2 hypotheses, and Kang et al.'s (2013) findings were contradicted. All latent variables demonstrated direct effects. Among all model effects, perceived personal relevance exhibited the strongest direct effect on sustainable clothing purchase intention followed by consumer knowledge. (H3) Intention to purchase sustainable clothing will be (a) predicted by the same factors between groups, and (b) all effects between

factors will be equal between groups. Means comparison results did not support H3a. Cohen's measure of practical significance indicated that all but three PJ group means were significantly greater ($d > 0.02$), and there was less spread between their responses to all items. Responses to behavioral intention items such as 'I intend to purchase sustainable clothing within the next 12 months' and perceived personal relevance items such as 'buying sustainable clothing helps me express who I am' were the most polarized ($d > 0.08$). Furthermore, most people in the PJ group already owned sustainable clothing (72%) and were first-time users of the site (72%). H3b was also not supported; confidence interval assessment suggested that two effect strengths were significantly different between groups ($p < 0.01$) indicating 'differential item functioning' (Dimitrov, 2006). (1) For MT group the effect of consumer knowledge on behavioral intention was significant (r = 0.53, $p < 0.01$, CI = 0.16, 0.46), but the effect was not significant for PJ group (r = -0.03, $p = 0.61$, CI = 0.55, 1.02). Because the PJ group already exhibited stronger behavioral intention, this suggests that consumer knowledge was less salient in predicting the behavior. (2) Instead, perceived personal relevance had the strongest effect on behavioral intention across groups, and these effects were significantly stronger for PJ group compared to the MT group (PJ group r = 0.45, $p < 0.01$, CI = -0.57, 0.34; MT group r = 0.25, $p < 0.01$, CI = 2.10, 3.07).

Figure 1. Theoretical framework and results across groups.
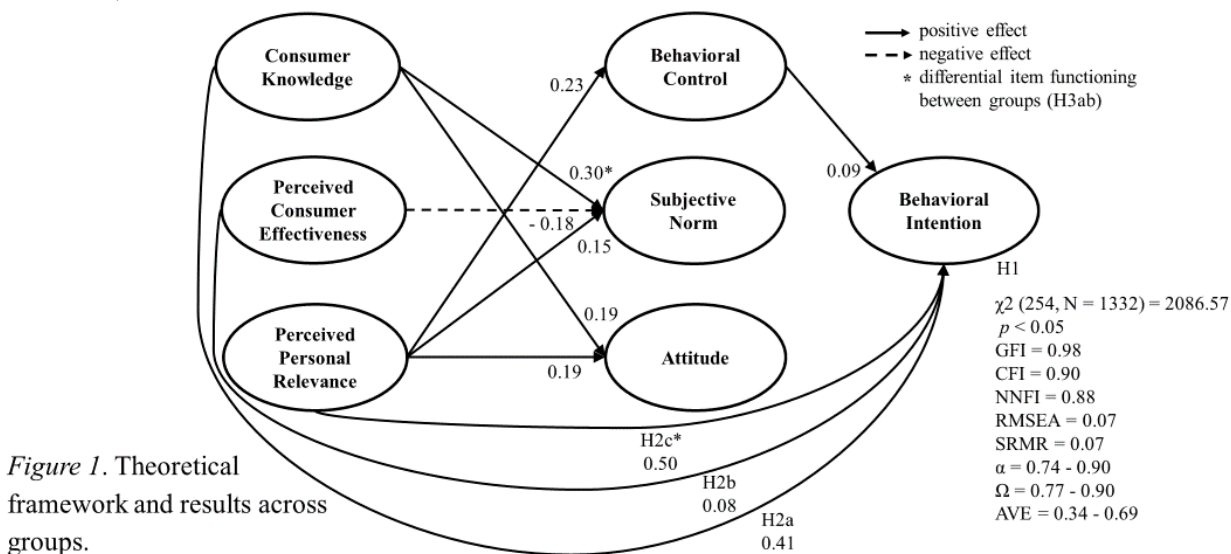
Implications. The group that was seeking sustainable clothing consumer knowledge already perceived the information as being personally relevant, which echoes prior findings (Dickson, 2001). This study's results contribute that these information seekers already intended to purchase sustainable clothing when they found the website. Rather than fundamentally changing behavioral intention, these tools seem to offer shopping guides. To change clothes shopping priorities and increase website traffic from non-users, the content provided by online sustainable clothing consumer knowledge tools ought to target non-users' perceived personal relevance. Acknowledging the contradiction between Millennials' preference for sustainable products and disposable fashion could be one pressure point.

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