



## **Sustainability through an Equity Lens: Barriers to Sustainable Fashion Consumption for Racial Minorities**

Naeun (Lauren) Kim<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D., Paige Tomfohrde<sup>2</sup>, & Missy Bye<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D.

<sup>1</sup> University of Minnesota & <sup>2</sup> Cornell University

*Keywords:* Sustainability, BIPOC, race, consumption barriers, theory of planned behavior

### Background and Objectives

Sustainable fashion, defined as clothing and accessories that “maximizes positive and equitable social, environmental, and economic impacts, while minimizing negative impacts” (Tomfohrde & Bye, 2021) has been touted as the climate change solutions we need to address the current overconsumption and pollution issues. The adoption and use of more sustainable fashion concepts by consumers is more critical than ever before. As a first step, it is essential to understand what barriers inhibit sustainable purchase behaviors. Thus far, these barriers have been researched extensively among the broader public, especially in western societies (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). However, current research has not examined how minority race individuals (BIPOC) within the United States experience barriers to sustainable fashion consumption (SFC). Consumption barriers for racial minority consumers could differ from the established ones since their lived experiences are different. This study seeks to rectify that gap in the research by understanding the relationship between minority race individuals and established barriers, as well as potential new minority race-specific barriers for SFC through a quantitative method.

### Theoretical Background

Using the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), we investigated both the established and emerging barriers to sustainable fashion consumption among racial minorities.

*Established Barriers* - First, previous research has established that knowledge is a barrier to SFC (Jung et al. 2021). Racial minorities have been found to be equal or stronger believers in climate change than white individuals (Schuldt & Pearson, 2016); thus, accurate knowledge of sustainable apparel would positively affect attitude toward SFC (H1). Second, sustainably made apparel often comes at a higher price point because of its ethically and environmentally superior practices. Minority individuals are often faced with more financial disadvantage. Hence, financial cost would negatively affect attitude toward SFC (H2). Third, studies indicate that lack of availability is a barrier to SFC (Brandão & da Costa, 2021), and the lack of size availability, which more directly impacts racial minorities, may contribute to more disparate attitudes toward SFC (H3). Fourth, despite the increased cost, consumers do not always view the materials and construction of sustainable materials as more durable (Kang & Kim, 2013). Thus, we expect poor perceived quality to negatively affect attitude toward SFC (H4). Fifth, studies have confirmed that a lack of diverse style options contribute to individuals' lack of desire to purchase sustainable items (Brandão & da Costa, 2021). As such, a wide range of product styles would positively affect attitude towards SFC (H5).

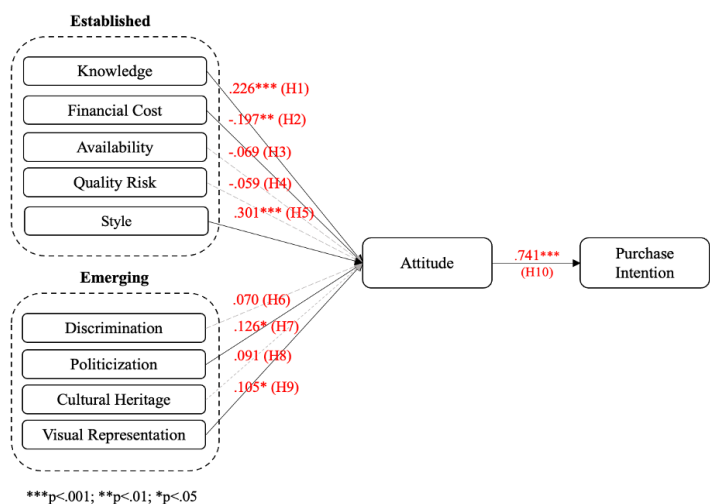
*Emerging Barriers* - Our study builds on Tomfohrde and Bye's (2021) recent discovery of four additional barriers to SFC for racial minorities. First, discrimination practices of sustainable fashion brands may be a more significant factor for racial minorities because they contribute to a culture of exclusivity (von Busch, 2018), leading to a negative attitude towards SFC (H6). Second, studies in marketing assert that consumers prefer to buy from unsustainable brands that show racially diverse models in advertising for better visual representation (Ahiaveh & Mawire, 2020). Thus, we posit that diverse visual representation would positively affect attitude towards SFC (H7). Third, Tomfohrde and Bye (2021) found that individuals with mixed racial heritage often struggled with feeling they did not belong to any one of their races/cultures, and therefore, could not wear the clothing of that culture without appropriation. As a result, it is anticipated that integrating cultural heritage would positively affect SFC (H8). Next, it has been suggested that racial minorities are sensitive to the political affiliations of the sustainable brands they purchase from given the polarizing political climate (Tomfohrde & Bye, 2021). Hence, political alignment may positively affect attitude towards SFC (H9). Lastly, based on the TPB, we expect attitude to positively influence purchase intention (H10).

### Methods

An online survey was utilized, and the participants were recruited through Prolific. To ensure an equal distribution of participants from various racial minority groups, a stratified sampling method was used. A total of 240 complete, usable responses were collected with 40 participants belonging to each of the following six racial demographic groups: 1) Black or African Americans, 2) Hispanic or Latino Americans, 3) Native Americans or Alaskan Native, 4) Asian American or Pacific Islander, 5) Middle Eastern, and 6) Mixed Race or Others. All constructs were measured using well-established, multi-item scales borrowed from previous studies, and their psychometric properties (e.g., reliability, discriminant validity) were ensured. The partial least squares (PLS) path modeling technique was used via SmartPLS 3.3 to test the hypotheses.

## Results

The results showed that knowledge (H1) ( $\beta = .226^{***}$ ), financial cost (H2) ( $\beta = -.197^{**}$ ), and style (H5) ( $\beta = .301^{***}$ ) significantly influenced attitude while availability (H3) ( $\beta = -.069$ ) and quality risk (H4) ( $\beta = -.059$ ) did not. Among the emerging barriers, politicization (H7) ( $\beta = .126^*$ ) and visual representation (H9) ( $\beta = .105^*$ ) had positive significant effects on attitude, whereas discrimination (H6) ( $\beta = .070$ ) and cultural heritage (H8) ( $\beta = .091$ )



only showed marginal support at an alpha level of .1. Lastly, H10 was supported ( $\beta = .741^{***}$ ). We also assessed the effects of the determinants for each racial group and found the results to vary across groups.

## Discussion & Implications

Our findings show that racial minorities in the U.S. indeed experience different kinds of barriers toward SFC from the non-minority group from previous studies. Among the established barriers, style of clothing was a leading factor for engaging in SFC while cost was a significant inhibitor. Less documented barriers such as political alignment and visual representation should be also considered (e.g., use of diverse models in advertising). Finally, the comparison of results across each racial group reveals that minority race groups are not monolithic, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all marketing strategy will no longer fare well for diverse groups of consumers.

## References

- Ahiaveh, A. N., & Mawire, M. (2020). *Exploring the mediating impact of identity on perceptions of racially diverse fast fashion advertisements: Evidence from millennial individuals* [Master's thesis, Lund University]. Lund University Publications.  
<https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=9030929&fileId=9030930>
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179-211.
- Brandão, A., & da Costa, A. G. (2021). Extending the theory of planned behaviour to understand the effects of barriers towards sustainable fashion consumption. *European Business Review*, 33(5), 742-774.

- Joshi, Y., & Rahman, Z. (2015). Factors affecting green purchase behaviour and future research directions. *International Strategic management review*, 3(1-2), 128-143.
- Jung, H.J. Oh, K.W. & Kim, H.M. (2021). Country differences in determinants of behavioral intention towards sustainable apparel products. *Sustainability*, 13, 558.
- Kang, J., & Kim, S. H. (2013). What are consumers afraid of? Understanding perceived risk toward the consumption of environmentally sustainable apparel. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 41(3), 267-283.
- Schuldt, J., & Pearson, A. (2016). The role of race and ethnicity in climate change polarization: evidence from a U.S. national survey experiment. *Climatic Change*, 136(3), 495-505.
- Tomfohrde, P. & Bye, E. (2021). Accelerating racial equity in sustainable apparel: Barriers to entry for racial minorities [Paper presentation]. Sustainable Innovation 2021: Accelerating Sustainability in Fashion, Clothing, Sportswear & Accessories, The Centre for Sustainable Design, University for the Creative Arts, Surrey, UK.
- Von Busch, O. (2018). Inclusive fashion—an oxymoron—or a possibility for sustainable fashion?. *Fashion Practice*, 10(3), 311-327.