

What drive U.S. young consumers to purchase sustainable apparel? An empirical study

Hannah Huynh, Hang Liu, and Ting Chi

Department of Apparel, Merchandising, Design and Textiles, Washington State University

Keywords: young consumers, sustainable apparel, attitude, purchase intention

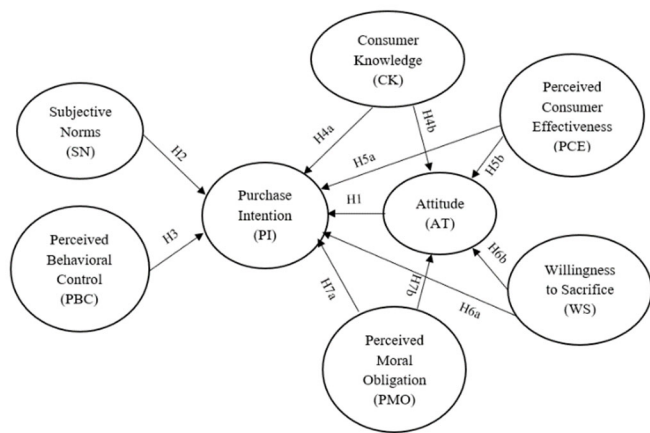
Introduction and Literature Review. Fast fashion has drastically altered consumer purchasing attitude and behavior, particularly among young consumers who can only afford low prices and are addicted to the accessibility of trendy apparel. However, some more recent surveys and research showed a growing trend among young consumers for concerning the environmental deterioration and pollution issues and being more willing to take actions to address these problems (CGS, 2019; Ganak et al., 2020). According to a recent study of multiple age groups in the U.S. (CGS, 2019), the young generations (i.e., Gen Z, Millennials) could potentially generate the greatest amount of commerce in thrift buying and donation. McKinsey (2020) reported that 75 percent of U.S. Gen Z and millennial in their survey indicated that they consider sustainability when making apparel purchases or disposing of apparel. Sustainable apparel refers to clothing products are designed, manufactured, distributed, and used in ways that are environmentally friendly (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021).

Among the growing interest in sustainability and sustainable apparel, our understanding on the factors driving this movement has been evolving rapidly in recent years. New insights are desired by both academics and industry practitioners (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). To enhance our knowledge on this critical subject, this study aimed to identify the factors significantly influencing the U.S. young consumers' (i.e., Gen Z, Millennials) purchase intention toward sustainable apparel. Specifically, the objectives of this research were fourfold. First, a research model building on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was proposed. Second, the psychometric properties of the proposed model were examined using the gathered survey data. Third, the effects of significant factors on the U.S. young consumers' purchase intention toward

sustainable apparel were identified. Finally, some implications were provided for academia and industrial practitioners. Figure 1 illustrates the developed model with the proposed hypotheses.

Methodology. The scales for purchase intention (PI), attitude (AT), subjective norm (SN), perceived behavioral control (PBC), and perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) were adapted from Chi et al. (2021). The scales for willingness to sacrifice (WS) was adapted from Coy et al. (2012). Perceived moral obligation (PMO)

Figure 1. Proposed Research Model



was adapted from Chen and Tung (2014). A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5 = strongly agree) was applied for all adapted scales. The demographic variables including gender, age, education level and income level were included as control factors. The primary data were collected by a Qualtrics survey of U.S. young consumers. 178 eligible responses were gathered for data analysis and hypothesis testing. Unidimensionality, reliability, and validity of the investigated constructs were first tested for proving model adequacy (Byrne, 1998). The statistical assumptions including normality, multicollinearity, and correlations were examined (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978). Multiple regression method was applied for determining the proposed statistical relationships (hypotheses) using SPSS 27.

Findings and Discussion. Table 1 presents the testing results of all the hypotheses. Among 11 hypotheses, seven of them (H1, H3, H4b, H5b, H6a, H7a and H7b) were statically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. Attitude (AT), subjective norm (SN), perceived behavioral control (PBC), willingness to sacrifice (WS) and perceived moral obligation (PMO) positively affect U.S. young consumer purchase intention (PI) toward sustainable apparel. Consumer knowledge (CK) and perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) do not affect purchase intention directly but shape young consumers' attitude toward sustainable apparel. In other words, attitude plays a full mediating role between consumer knowledge (CK), perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE), and their purchase intention. In addition, perceived moral obligation (PMO) positively affect young consumers' attitude toward sustainable apparel, showing attitude plays a partial mediating role between perceived moral obligation (PMO) and purchase intention. Demographic variables don't show any statistically significant impact on U.S. young consumers' purchase intention toward sustainable apparel. However, younger female consumers with higher education level showed more positive attitude and purchase intention toward sustainable apparel. Income level is less relevant to young consumers' attitude and purchase intention toward sustainable apparel. The proposed research model exhibits a good explanatory power, accounting for 69.6% of variance in U.S. consumers' purchase intention toward sustainable apparel.

Table 1. Results of hypothesis testing

Hyp.	DV	IDV	Std. Coef. (β)	t-value	Sig. at $p < .05$	Control variable	Std. Coef. (β)	t-value	Sig. at $p < .05$	Total R^2	Sig. at $p < .05$
	PI	Constant		-3.058	.003						<.000
H1	Y	AT	.238	3.817	.000	Age	-.092	-1.699	.091	.696	$F = 34.299$ (11/165)
H2	N	SN	.074	1.293	.198	Gender	.077	1.715	.088		
H3	Y	PBC	.192	2.755	.001	Education	.003	.055	.956		
H4a	N	CK	.009	.178	.859	Income	-.004	-.102	.919		
H5a	N	PCE	.029	.553	.581						
H6a	Y	WS	.345	5.118	.000						
H7a	Y	PMO	.239	3.307	.001						
	AT			4.881	.000						

H4b	Y	CK	.181	2.856	.005	Age	-.092	-1.326	.187	.482	<.000
H5b	Y	PCE	.345	5.566	.000	Gender	.015	.253	.800		<i>F</i> =19.520 (8/168)
H6b	N	WS	.012	.139	.890	Education	.036	.507	.613		
H7b	Y	PMO	.375	4.256	.000	Income	-.043	-.765	.445		

Note: Hyp.= Hypothesis; Y: Hypothesis Supported; N: Hypothesis Not Supported; Std.

Coef.=Standardized Coefficients, DV: Dependent variable. IDV: Independent variable; Consumer knowledge=CK, attitude =AT, subjective norm=SN, perceived consumer effectiveness =PCE, perceived behavioral control=PBC, willingness to sacrifice =WS, perceived moral obligation = PMO, purchase intention=PI.

References

- Byrne, B. (1998). *Structural equation modeling with LISREL, PRELIS, & SIMPLIS: Basic concepts, applications, & programming*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- CGS. (2019). CGS Survey Reveals ‘Sustainability’ Is Driving Demand and Customer Loyalty. Retrieved on December 2nd, 2021 from <https://www.cgsinc.com/en/infographics/CGS-Survey-Reveals-Sustainability-Is-Driving-Demand-and-Customer-Loyalty>.
- Chi, T., Gerard, J., Yu, Y., & Wang, Y. (2021). A study of US consumers’ intention to purchase slow fashion apparel: Understanding the key determinants. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 14(1), 101-112.
- Coy, A. E., Farrell, A. K., Gilson, K. P., Davis, J. L., & Le, B. (2013). Commitment to the environment and student support for “green” campus initiatives. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 3(1), 49-55.
- Ganak, J., Chen, Y., Liang, D., Liu, H., & Chi, T. (2020). Understanding US millennials’ perceived values of denim apparel recycling: insights for brands and retailers. *International Journal of Sustainable Society*, 12(4), 267-290.
- McKinsey. (2020). Consumer sentiment on sustainability in fashion. Retrieved on March 1st, 2022 from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/survey-consumer-sentiment-on-sustainability-in-fashion>.
- Nunnally, J. C., and I. H. Bernstein. (1978). *Psychometric Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rausch, T. M., & Kopplin, C. S. (2021). Bridge the gap: Consumers’ purchase intention and behavior regarding sustainable clothing. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 278, 123882.