



Socially responsible Millennial consumers: Debunking the myth of the “It” generation

Olivia Johnson, Texas State University & Veena Chattaraman, Auburn University, USA

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Background. Social responsibility has rapidly gained popularity among consumers, specifically among Millennials born between 1980 and 2000. Millennials’ commitment to social responsibility extends beyond words and influences their behaviors and purchase intentions (Swinand, 2014). As symbols, brands serve as a mechanism for strengthening the way consumers think about themselves and communicate this identity to others. Thus, consuming socially responsible (SR) fashion brands can provide a symbolic link to SR Millennial’s self and identity (Wattanasuwan, 2005), allowing for a “transfer” of meanings when Millennials choose to consume SR brands (McCracken, 1989). The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the socio-cognitive process Millennials engage in when making SR consumption decisions through the integrative lens of symbolic self-completion theory and identity theory.

Theoretical Framework. Symbolic self-completion theory is founded on the principle that individuals seek to maintain and control their identities by self-symbolizing (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Individuals use symbols as a measure of their competency in a given social context, implying to others within the social group their ability or competency (Schiffmann & Nelkenbrecher, 1994). We propose that Millennials committed to the SR identity will engage in different routes of symbolic self-completion. These routes will be demonstrated through either public or private SR consumption behavior. This research contends that individuals engage in “public” behavior when the link between the SR behavior and product are known and witnessed by others (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Thus, a behavior is classified as public as a result of its dependence on others awareness of the connection between social responsibility and the behavior. Conversely, “private” behavior suggests that the link between the SR behavior and product are unknown (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). While symbolic self-completion explains the outcome, identity theory illuminates the mechanism underlying the behavior. Identity theory postulates that the salience of an identity is influenced by the level of commitment (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The stronger the commitment, the more salient the identity; the more salient the identity, the stronger the behavior associated with it. We conceptualize SR identity salience as originating from two distinct mechanisms – personal and social. Our study proposes that personal and social SR identity salience can mediate the effects of SR identity commitment on SR private and public consumption behavior. The hypotheses for this study will focus on two main areas: 1) the influence of SR identity commitment on Millennials’ SR consumption behavior (public vs. private) and SR identity salience (personal vs. social) (H1 & H2); and 2) SR identity salience (personal vs. social) as a mediator of the relationship between Millennials’ SR identity commitment and SR consumption behavior (private vs. public) (H3 & H4).

Method. This study employed a web-based survey as the research strategy to test the hypotheses. A random sample of enrolled students and staff from a large southern university in the United States was recruited for this study. The sample was accessed using the Office of

Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) at the university. The intended population for the study were Millennials born between 1980 and 1997. The questionnaire included measures for SR identity commitment, SR identity salience (personal vs social), and SR private and public consumption behavior. Hypotheses were tested via structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS version 24.0.

Results. While 389 respondents started the survey, only 365 surveys were complete and valid. The sample of the study included 126 males (34.5%) and 237 females (64.9%). The average age of the respondents was 24.77 with ages ranging from 19 to 35. Prior to testing individual hypotheses, a full SEM model was tested with all measures, yielding acceptable fit, $\chi^2 = 472.058$, $df = 241$; GFI = 0.936, CFI = 0.967, NFI = 0.936, RMR = 0.052, RMSEA = 0.051. Hypotheses H1(a, b) and H2(a, b) propose a positive relationship between SR identity commitment and SR private and public consumption behavior; and SR identity commitment and SR personal and social identity salience. Both models displayed acceptable fit and positive regression weights. For hypothesis 1 model fit was good $\chi^2 = 166.337$, $df = 73$; GFI = 0.937, CFI = 0.968, NFI = 0.944, RMR = 0.060, RMSEA = 0.059. Regression weights ($\beta = .16$) and ($\beta = .34$) were both significant ($p < .001$), supporting H1a and H1b. For hypothesis 2 model fit was acceptable $\chi^2 = 163.571$, $df = 61$; GFI = 0.937, CFI = 0.979, NFI = 0.967, RMR = 0.034, RMSEA = 0.068. Regression weights ($\beta = .65$) and ($\beta = .63$) were both significant ($p < .001$), supporting H2a and H2b. When personal identity salience was introduced in the relationship between SR identity commitment and SR private consumption behavior, the relationship between SR identity commitment and SR private consumption behavior became insignificant $\beta = -.05$ ($p = .483$), with the following paths remaining significant: a) SR identity commitment \rightarrow SR personal identity salience; and b) SR personal identity salience \rightarrow SR private consumption behavior. SR personal identity salience completely mediated the relationship between SR identity commitment and SR private consumption behavior, supporting H3a. Additionally, SR personal identity salience completely mediated the relationship between SR identity commitment and SR public consumption behavior, supporting H3b. Conversely, SR social identity did not significantly influence SR public consumption behavior, therefore H4 was not supported.

Managerial Implications. The outcomes of the study have several research and managerial implications. This research contributes to the extant literature by determining the importance of personal identity salience in a Millennials decision to engage in public and private consumption behavior. This suggests that brand managers need to create opportunities for Millennials to engage in both private and public consumption behavior. Secondly, this research suggests that environmental concern may be insignificant to Millennial consumers thus supporting Roberts (1993) assertion that the resurgence in social responsibility is based on consumption behavior. Therefore, SR opportunities that are designed to reduce consumption or impact others through their purchases may resonate more with Millennials.

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