

An Exploration of Consumer Accountability for Sustainability in the Fast Fashion Industry

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The prevailing culture of overconsumption, spearheaded by the fast fashion (FF) industry, has recently been called into question, evidenced by the emergence of movements such as slow fashion. Slow fashion is a counter movement to the consumption practices that support the FF industry and is characterized by slow production at the company level and conscious consumption at the consumer level (Ertekin and Atik, 2015; McNeill and Moore, 2015). Concurrent with the emergence of slow fashion, FF companies (e.g., H&M) have ramped up their commitment to sustainability in their supply chains (Wicker, 2016). These measures are augmented by consumer-facing strategies (e.g., apparel-recycling programs, sustainably produced collections) aiming to position FF companies as sustainable. Such efforts have resonated with consumers, yet critics believe that this association is incredibly misleading as these initiatives overshadow the two factors that make FF fundamentally unsustainable- speed and volume (Bain, 2016; Hackett, 2016; Joy et al., 2012).

Research suggests that, in order for a paradigm shift toward conscious consumption to occur in the mainstream market, the concept of responsibility will be “valuable as it describes the longitudinal processes that turn collective social issues into issues of personal responsibility” (Luchs et al., 2015, p. 13). However, a challenge now exists as the concept of sustainability “has been diluted by mass media companies/FF retailers to create a marketing buzzword out of it” (Lam, 2017, p. 2). This corporate greenwashing allows FF brands to continue exploiting FF consumers’ desire for the new while limiting their exposure to messages that could increase their awareness of the environmental impact of their own consumption and disposal behaviors (Ertekin and Atik, 2015; Hill and Lee, 2012; McNeill and Moore, 2015). That is, corporate greenwashing shapes consumer perceptions of sustainability by positioning it as a responsibility managed by the company (e.g., good labor conditions, use of renewable resources) while downplaying the impact of consumers’ unsustainable consumption and disposal behaviors (Ertekin and Atik, 2015; McNeill and Moore, 2015). This research tests this assertion by examining consumers’ current perceptions of responsibility in the FF industry, with responsibility divided into two areas, industry and consumer responsibility.

Data were collected from a convenience sample of retailing students at two U.S. universities, yielding 405 usable responses. The survey instrument was an online questionnaire consisting of eight demographic questions and 103 closed-ended interrogative questions on a 7-point Likert scale. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was employed to examine the basic structure of the measures. Reliability was examined through EFA and the calculation of Cronbach’s alpha coefficients (above .60). The EFA identified four dimensions for apparel consumption behavior: overconsumption, mindful consumption, conscious disposal, and careless disposal. Factor loadings for each item ranged from 0.66 to 0.82. Cluster analysis was then used to group respondents into four unique segments based on the apparel consumption and disposal variables. Moderating variables (i.e., personal impact, knowledge seeking, satisfaction, and trend

consciousness) were introduced to identify potential effects on the original relationship between consumers' clothing consumption and disposal behaviors and their perceptions of responsibility for sustainability within the FF industry. Because the transition to a more sustainable apparel system will require a joint commitment by both companies and consumers, research approaches that explore consumers' felt responsibility for sustainability will continue to be meaningful. The results provide significant insights regarding consumer perceptions of accountability for sustainability in one sector (i.e., FF) of the apparel industry.

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