

I Subscribe, Therefore I Am:
An Assessment of Apparel Retail Subscription Consumers and Environmental Sustainability

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Introduction: There has been a recent rise in subscription service websites (Forbes, 2019). With that rise has come heightened activity among fashion-oriented subscription service websites. Examples of fashion-oriented subscription services include Stitch Fix, Le Tote, Gwynnie Bee and Trunk Club. Some subscription services allow consumers to rent and “swap out” items; thus, members of these fashion subscription services may possess a “green” mindset. The purpose of this study was to examine the differences between consumers who participate in apparel retail subscription services and those who do not, given environmental sustainability. According to Tajfel and Turner’s Social Identity Theory (1979), individuals categorize themselves in certain social groups to define their membership within society at large. The social identity theory states that a person’s perception of self depends in large part on their group membership. People identify a group to which they belong and begin to behave as others within the same group. People then compare their group to other groups who behave differently. Apparel subscription consumers and those who do not subscribe are two different groups. Thus, their membership in these groups may warrant different behaviors and orientations. One such orientation that apparel subscription consumers may possess is an environmental orientation, given the nature of the subscription business model. Another possible orientation difference is shopping motivation, specifically hedonic vs. utilitarian. Few studies to date have addressed the topic of apparel retail subscription consumers and even fewer have examined the characteristics of these consumers. This study seeks to address these gaps.

Literature: Collaborative consumption encompasses a range of business models that allow for consumption of goods outside of traditional ownership (i.e. renting, swapping, etc.) (Lamberton & Rose, 2012). Members of fashion subscription service websites may participate in collaborative consumption behavior, which encourages “sharing” merchandise in a sustainable manner (Laitala, 2014). Past research suggests that environmentally conscious consumers have an interest in companies that maintain friendly consumption practices (Luzio & Lenke, 2013). Apparel retail subscription services are an alternative form of consumption. Few studies to date have assessed fashion subscription services with regards to environmental orientations. One hypothesis of the current study was that there is a difference between subscribers and non-subscribers in their concern for the environment. A second hypothesis, regarding characteristics, is that there is a difference between apparel subscribers and non-subscribers regarding hedonic shopping orientations.

Methods: An online survey was administered to 380 adults in the general population (235 subscribers and 155 nonsubscribers) using Qualtrics Consumer Panels. Environmental Concern was measured using a scale adapted from Kim, Lee & Yang (2013) and Ellen et al. (1991) (Cronbach's Alpha=0.82). The hedonic shopping orientation was measured using a scale adapted from Kang, J. & Park-Poaps, H. (2011) (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.94).

Results: There were 235 participants in the apparel retail subscriber convenience sample with the following demographics: 40% female (n=93) and 60% (n=142) male; 68% (n=159) White, 16% (n=38) Black or African American, 7% (n=16) Hispanic/Non-white, 5% (n=11) Asian, and 4% (n=9) Other; and 60% (n=68) under the age of 40. There were 155 participants in the non-subscriber sample with the following demographics: 68% female (n=106) and 32% male (n=49); 77% (n=119) White, 14% (n=22) Black or African American, 1% (n=1) Hispanic/Non-white, 4% (n=6) Asian, and 6% (n=9) Other; and 2% (n=36) under the age of 40. The top influence on subscribers' decision to subscribe was Friends/Relatives.

The results indicated a statistically significant difference in concern for the environment ($t=7.19$, $df=387.33$, $p<0.0001$) with subscribers ($n=235$, $mean=3.47$, $s=0.83$) being more concerned with the environment than non-subscribers ($n=155$, $mean=2.96$, $s=0.57$). Non-subscribers, on average, were more neutral in their concern for the environment. There was also a statistically significant difference between subscribers and non-subscribers on hedonic shopping orientations ($t=2.08$, $df=372.85$, $p<0.05$), with subscribers ($n=235$, $mean=3.65$, $s=0.83$) being more hedonic than non-subscribers ($n=155$, $mean=3.49$, $s=0.67$).

Conclusions: The results suggest apparel retail subscribers may possess a keen concern for their environment. Thus, their affiliation with apparel retail subscription services may help to support their sustainable consumption mindset. While environmental concerns were significant among subscribers, the hedonic shopping orientation was also exhibited among subscribers (i.e. motivated by fun and entertainment when shopping). These findings suggest that subscription services might be able to expand their consumer base through marketing campaigns that feature sustainable messaging, along with a shopping enjoyment factor. One example is Thred Up's marketing around their featured initiative called the Clean Out Kit. Future research could focus on the precise parts of the subscription model that appeal to consumers, thereby providing information to be used by services to further refine their marketing.

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