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Sustainability efforts in the fast fashion industry: consumer perception, trust and purchase intention

Fast fashion industry

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Received 18 November 2019

Revised 17 March 2020

6 June 2020

Accepted 24 June 2020

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to test for factors affecting environmental sustainability and purchase intention in the fashion industry. Accordingly, the authors developed a framework that depicts the relationships between perceptions of social responsibility, consumer attitude, trust, purchase intention and perceived consumer effectiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey was conducted with an internationally diverse sample of 216 consumers. Data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling.

Findings – The results indicated that perceptions of social responsibility directly affect consumers' attitudes towards these fashion brands, as well as trust and perceived consumer effectiveness. Also, consumers need to perceive sustainability efforts of these brands as altruistic, and trust was found to be a direct predictor of purchase intention. However, both consumer attitude and perceived consumer effectiveness did not predict purchase intention.

Research limitations/implications – The survey was primarily distributed to young people. Therefore, a generalisation of the findings to other age groups might be limited.

Practical implications – Practicing managers should emphasise the fact that environmental sustainability and fast fashion brands could be sustainable to increase trust among consumers.

Social implications – When it comes to environmental issues, positive perceptions regarding the companies' social responsibility efforts are vital to enhance both consumers' trust towards the brands and their individual feeling of empowerment.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *5th Symposium on Ethics and Social Responsibility*, ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal, 6–7 June 2019. This work was funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2013, UID/ECO/00124/2019 and Social Sciences DataLab, LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-022209), POR Lisboa (LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722, LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-022209) and POR Norte (LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-022209). This study was also supported by UNIDCOM under a Grant by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UIDB/DES/00711/2020) attributed to UNIDCOM/IADE – Unidade de Investigação em Design e Comunicação, Lisbon, Portugal.



Sustainability Accounting,
Management and Policy Journal
Vol. 12 No. 3, 2021
pp. 571-590
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2040-8021
DOI: 10.1108/SAMPJ-11-2019-0405

Introduction

It is argued that the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world, threatening our planet and its resources (Business of Fashion, 2015). This is echoed by consumers' rising concern for the impact of their purchasing decisions on the environment (Kang *et al.*, 2013; Miller and Merrilees, 2013). Companies and brands from various sectors have reacted by developing environmentally friendly production processes and products (Haws *et al.*, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2013). Sustainability has also advanced into the fashion industry, although there is still the notion of a partial incompatibility of the two – thinking about the environment while shopping for clothes seems to impair consumers' pleasure and hedonic reasons to engage in it in the first place (Valor, 2007). However, despite a rising concern among consumers, they often hesitate to directly translate their considerations into action (D'Astous and Legendre, 2009), due to several reasons. Fast fashion brands are viewed to be unsustainable due to their nature alone (Joy *et al.*, 2012; Valor, 2007), and sustainability efforts of these companies are frequently questioned and perceived as untruthful (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014; Mahsud *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, consumers often do not feel they can make a difference regarding environmental problems as an individual. At the same time, two internationally well-known fast fashion brands (specifically, H&M and Zara) both have quite successfully launched their own sustainable clothing lines, but does it make a difference in consumers' minds? In this work, we will build on these two brands and their sustainable clothing lines, examine their success in terms of consumer attitude and investigate whether consumers trust claims of those brands regarding their pro-environmental efforts. We will also explore:

- how consumers feel they could individually affect environmental issues;
- whether the former relation is affected by perceptions of sustainability efforts; and
- how this translates into their intention to purchase sustainable clothing of the two brands.

Theoretical framework and literature review

The emergence of sustainability and its stakeholders

While industrial development over the past decades has brought prosperity and wealth to our economy, our planet's resources are not infinite. We are currently facing many environmental problems, namely, loss of biodiversity, global warming, freshwater scarcity and food insecurity, ozone depletion and deforestation and further social issues such as inequity or poverty (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Shrivastava, 1995). Consequently, research recognised the importance for raising awareness on the aforementioned issues, and for corporations, governments and consumers to react (Shrivastava, 1995). Sustainability or sustainable development is a "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987, p. 8). It should embrace both human and environmental systems, in the present as well as in the future. Resources should be distributed fairly, within and between present and future

generations, and the scale of impact of human activity should be kept within regenerative capacities (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995). Sustainability involves several dynamic systems and shows intersections among ecological, economic and socio-political dimensions, both globally and locally (Joy *et al.*, 2012; Murray *et al.*, 2010), thus involving multiple parties.

Consumers have become increasingly aware of sustainability (Ritch, 2015), requiring governmental institutions and companies to take actions, while they frequently seem to be unaware or uninformed of their responsibility and the impact of their own consumption (Joergens, 2006). However, the trend of “sustainable consumerism” is on the rise (Singh *et al.*, 2012; Valor, 2007). Governmental institutions have mitigated many environmental and social problems through policies and programmes, but their efforts need to be complemented by corporations to fully address these issues (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Shrivastava, 1995). Often, companies are, thus, assigned with an enormous responsibility (Shrivastava, 1995). Their frequently global operations have a high impact on the planet and its people, and they have the necessary financial and technological resources to bring about sustainable solutions (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Shrivastava, 1995), which is of interest to them for many reasons. Consequently, they are equally affected by the outcomes of their actions (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995). On the other hand, there are reasons of competitiveness and profitability (Maxfield, 2008). As consumers become more knowledgeable, they expect companies to reflect their ethical concerns (Schaltegger and Hörisch, 2017). Should companies manage to do so, they would be rewarded with a positive consumer response, improving the strength of the company–customer relationship, namely, by increasing customer loyalty, retention and repurchase rate (Naylor and Trudel, 2012; Singh *et al.*, 2012). Thus, sustainability represents an integral part of companies’ lives and a key issue for businesses across all industries (Bonini and Swartz, 2014; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014).

Sustainability, ethicality and corporate social responsibility

The terms “ethics”, “ethicality” and “corporate social responsibility” are frequently found in sustainability research. Similar to sustainability, ethics deals with the question of how we should live and act (ECI, 2017) and discusses environmental (Jung *et al.*, 2016; Singh *et al.*, 2012; Wesley *et al.*, 2012), as well as social issues (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014; Bray *et al.*, 2011). Ethics seems to occasionally be connoted with a stricter focus on social issues rather than providing a holistic view over social and environmental problems such as sustainability (Jung *et al.*, 2016; Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). However, researchers use both terms somewhat interchangeably (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014; Ehrlich and Irwin, 2005). Accordingly – even though we will not differentiate between the two terms – we will refer to “sustainability” for the sake of consistency.

As sustainability, corporate social responsibility of companies or brands (D’Astous and Legendre, 2009; Kang and Hustvedt, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2012), or socially responsible consumer behaviour (Valor, 2007; Wesley *et al.*, 2012), deals with social as well as environmental issues (Rubel, 2010). The term applies exclusively to a company’s point of view and is vital to a company’s overall strategy (Keys *et al.*, 2009). It deals with pursuing benefits for the firm, as well as for society (Keys *et al.*, 2009). In integrating corporate social responsibility into their strategy, companies aim to increase transparency about their business activities (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014), portray themselves as being socially responsible (Singh *et al.*, 2012) and improve their reputation (Naylor and Trudel, 2012). Whereas sustainability broadly describes the previously discussed environmental and social issues, corporate social responsibility is understood as the explicit manner of companies meeting the needs of socially responsible consumers (Wesley *et al.*, 2012).

Sustainable and socially responsible consumerism do not seem to be further distinguished from each other (Valor, 2007; Wesley *et al.*, 2012). Corporate social responsibility and sustainability are regularly mentioned collectively (Carrigan and Attala, 2001; Joy *et al.*, 2012; Kang and Hustvedt, 2014; Shen *et al.*, 2013; Singh *et al.*, 2012), or even used interchangeably (Solér *et al.*, 2015).

Sustainability and the environment

In line with Seidman (2007), we acknowledge that sustainability is about more than our relationship with the environment. However, to not exceed the scope of this work, we will primarily concentrate on environmental – or ecological – sustainability and environmentally conscious consumer behaviour. Specifically, this issue has been discussed beforehand by several authors (Haws *et al.*, 2014; Jung *et al.*, 2016; Leary *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, consumers show a willingness to incorporate their concern for the environment into their behaviour, e.g. through recycling (Kim and Choi, 2005; Shen *et al.*, 2013), which makes it seem reasonable to further pursue this area of sustainability.

The emergence of (environmental) sustainability in the fashion industry

Over the past decade, environmental sustainability began to become widely acknowledged in the fashion industry, and one of the first movements was criticism from animal rights activists for the use of fur or animal skin in fashion clothing products (Emberley, 1998). It is argued that the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world, with every stage in a garment's life threatening our planet and its resources (Business of Fashion, 2015), and literature underlines the necessity for fashion brands to more strongly incorporate environmental sustainability into their offering (Ritch, 2015). Especially affordable and trend-sensitive fashion, while highly profitable for companies, has raised ethical concerns (Joy *et al.*, 2012), and companies start to consider the consequences of their design and industrial manufacturing processes (Niinimäki, 2015). Consumers are beginning to transfer their concerns for the environment – which originally mainly involved food consumption choices – to the fashion context (Ritch, 2015; Shen *et al.*, 2013).

Sustainable fashion is also designated as “green” (Shen *et al.*, 2013), “ethical” (Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014) or “eco” fashion (Solér *et al.*, 2015), with all terms used synonymously (Shaw and Newholm, 2007; Shen *et al.*, 2013). Sustainable fashion is defined as “(apparel) that incorporates fair trade principles with sweatshop-free labour conditions; that does not harm the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton, and designed for a longer lifetime use; that is produced in an ethical production system, perhaps even locally, which causes little or no environmental impact and makes use of eco-labelled or recycled materials” (Joergens, 2006, p. 361; Kang and Hustvedt, 2014; Shen *et al.*, 2013, p. 135). In line with our previous argumentation, some researchers assign a stronger focus on social issues, such as fair trade principles and a production system without sweatshop labour conditions to the term ethical fashion – whereas ecological, environmental or “green” fashion deals with environmental matters (Shen *et al.*, 2013). In this context, “reduce”, “reuse”, “recycle” have become guiding principles for both companies and consumers to fight damage to the environment (Binotto and Payne, 2017).

The term sustainable or ethical apparel primarily describes textile clothing products (Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009; Joy *et al.*, 2012; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009), but it is also occasionally used in a broader sense, then encompassing textile clothing products and other materials and every item worn outwardly (Jung *et al.*, 2016). Environmental sustainability in the fashion industry attaches great importance to the type of fibre being used (Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008).

Sustainable fashion can further be viewed through the perspective of a company's supply chain. As its definition already partly hinted at, and as previously stated, how a fashion company organises its supply chain carries some important implications for the sustainable nature of its products (Valor, 2007), especially due to the trend of globalisation and a resulting increased complexity in accountability (Joy *et al.*, 2012). This factor is constantly demanding fashion companies to oversee and re-evaluate (parts of) their supply chain (Keller *et al.*, 2014; Singer, 2015), to remain competitive in their industry (Valor, 2007). When it comes to material, its source and production method, it is vital for a product to be labelled sustainable (Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008). Furthermore, the site of production plays a significant role, with local production as the most sustainable option (Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008; Shen *et al.*, 2013). However, depending on the price of its products, local production is often not an option for fashion companies (Joy *et al.*, 2012). The origin of the product is also closely connected with its manufacturing process (i.e. in an ethical manner, without any unfair conditions for workers involved) (Joergens, 2006). While elements within the supply chain are certainly very important in the context of sustainability, nowadays, a company's supply chain is of global reach and highly fragmented (Joy *et al.*, 2012); thus, giving greater attention to this matter would exceed the scope of this work.

Environmentally sustainable consumer behaviour in the fast fashion industry

The fashion industry is divided into different segments, with respect to product pricing – luxury, with high end and affordable luxury brands, premium, mid- or mass-market, value and discount (Amed *et al.*, 2016). Mass-market brands are synonymously discussed under the term “fast fashion” (Joy *et al.*, 2012; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). When discussing fast fashion's compatibility with environmental sustainability, it has long been argued that its mere nature prohibits fast fashion to be sustainable, while frequently labelling it as “waste couture”. The business model behind fast fashion brands is a fast-response system. For the designers of luxury brands, once new trends have been shown on the catwalks, it usually takes up to six months from catwalk to consumer (Joy *et al.*, 2012). Fast fashion retailers have changed this timeline to a matter of mere weeks, constantly encouraging customers to keep coming back for the latest trends at a rate that has speed up so fast that literature talks about an “encouraged disposability” of fashion (Joy *et al.*, 2012) – this process has, in turn, prompted luxury brands to adopt shortened product lifecycles. However, one might falsely jump to the conclusion that fast fashion and sustainability do not go together. On the contrary, when aiming for a wider acceptance among fashion consumers, it is argued that sustainability needs to be mainstreamed through mass-market brands, as these brands reach a wider audience than luxury brands (Ritch, 2015). Thus, from this point of view, examining sustainability in the fashion industry based on two fast fashion brands, which are internationally well-known and available, seems to be a worthwhile starting point.

Consumers are powerful actors in the environmental sustainability movement (D'Astous and Legendre, 2009), and research has been urging to devote more attention to individual consumer behaviour towards clothes in this context (Valor, 2007). Their demand significantly drives the production of fashion companies (Binotto and Payne, 2017; Joy *et al.*, 2012); thus, it is vital to understand the complex mechanisms behind their behaviour (Joergens, 2006; Leary *et al.*, 2014). Consumer behaviour in the sustainability context is labelled as sustainable (Fennis *et al.*, 2011; Joy *et al.*, 2012; Leary *et al.*, 2014), ethical (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Carrington *et al.*, 2010; D'Astous and Legendre, 2009) or socially responsible buying behaviour (Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009; Valor, 2007). Regarding environmental sustainability, it is denoted as “green” (Haws *et al.*, 2014; Kim and Choi, 2005),

environmentally responsible (Berger and Corbin, 1992; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009) or sustainable consumer behaviour and purchase behaviour (Kang *et al.*, 2013) and environmentally – or ecologically – conscious buyer behaviour (Leary *et al.*, 2014). Applied to the fashion setting, it is conceptualised as sustainable, ethical or “eco fashion consumption” (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Ritch, 2015; Solér *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, it is a behaviour that incorporates concerns about consumers’ effects on the external world when buying, using and disposing of fashion products. Expressing sustainable consumer behaviour in this context ranges from consumers avoiding unsustainable fashion products to boycotting brands (Jung *et al.*, 2016).

Consumers increasingly have the opportunity to choose between environmentally friendly and traditional (clothing) products (Haws *et al.*, 2014). To better understand why and how they consume fashion sustainably, it is advised to also comprehend why consumers might have difficulties to do so (D’Astous and Legendre, 2009; De Cremer and van Dijk, 2002). While lack of availability of stylish options (Joergens, 2006) and an often higher price (Joy *et al.*, 2012) are acknowledged obstacles to consumers, we would like to highlight some internal barriers, such as the role of values and decision-making. Values refer to consumer’s personal assessment of the net worth obtained from an activity (Jung *et al.*, 2016), thus affecting a wide spectrum of behaviour and consumer decision processes. Broadly, there are utilitarian (functionality, quality, durability), hedonic (seeking novelty) and conspicuous (belonging to a group, status) values in consumption (Jung *et al.*, 2016). When shopping for clothes, all these values matter. However, when sustainable fashion comes into play, consumers often feel they have to trade-off their values for sustainability (Luchs and Kumar, 2015). Further, sustainable consumer behaviour has resulted in a rather rational or utilitarian decision-making. When it comes to fashion, there is also a lot of emotion to it (Solér *et al.*, 2015). Fashion is highly symbolic, allowing its owner to express self-identity, not only about the current self, but also about the aspirational or ideal self (Valor, 2007). Therefore, the creation of multiple identities is possible, further facilitated through affordable fashion. Frequently, consumers are unwilling to give up on this symbolic value to consume more sustainably (Joy *et al.*, 2012).

Perceptions of social responsibility

Several studies suggest that consumers are willing to support socially responsible companies (Barone *et al.*, 2000). Corporate social responsibility activities have a positive impact for firms in terms of customer satisfaction, and the relationship between consumers and companies is influenced by the consumers’ subjective estimation of the company’s behaviour, regarding what it openly communicates within its corporate social responsibility efforts, as well as unobserved intentions (Kitchin, 2003). This indicates that the impact of customer opinions about social responsibility of firms should not be neglected, and that it is further connected to general attitudes that consumers have about a company (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014).

(General) attitude

Attitude plays a vital role in sustainable consumer behaviour (Jung *et al.*, 2016). It is defined as the summed product of an individual’s beliefs on results of behaviour and evaluation of those beliefs (Kang *et al.*, 2013). This could be a rather complex setting, as beliefs are influenced by an individual’s values, perceptions about social pressure and opinions about what others think how the individual should behave (Jung *et al.*, 2016; Kang *et al.*, 2013). A consumer’s belief that is in favour of the environment – or environmental concern – is oriented towards the environment and the collective good, standing in contrast with a purely

self-interested attitude (Jung *et al.*, 2016). It is often a required antecedent, followed by the consumer gathering further information and knowledge about sustainable products (Shen *et al.*, 2013), which is then set within their perception of the social context and their attitudes (Jung *et al.*, 2016). Consumers' attitudes are becoming increasingly favourable of sustainability issues (Ehrich and Irwin, 2005) and were recently found to be a valid construct for predicting environmentally conscious consumer behaviour across numerous fields, including fashion (Halepete *et al.*, 2009; Kang *et al.*, 2013). Attitudes, if previously positively influenced by a company's sustainability efforts, further positively affect a consumer's intention to purchase products from the company (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). In line with these authors, we incorporate general attitude into our analysis to obtain a general understanding of the psychology of ethical consumers. When studying a specific behaviour (such as consumer behaviour in the context of environmental sustainability), it is advised that general attitude might not be enough, which is why we also include perceptions of social responsibility and trust.

Trust

Trust is defined as confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner, which is associated with consistency, honesty, fairness, responsibility, helpfulness and benevolence (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Reliability of a brand refers to consumers' beliefs that it will satisfy their needs. Trust in a brand further means consumers believe the brand's actions to be motivated by positive intentions towards their welfare (Delgado-Ballester, 2003). Brand trust is also positively related to brand authenticity (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). Trust is also a significant predictor for positive outcomes of marketing, such as loyalty, customer retention and purchase intention. Thus, it is vital for companies to establish a trustworthy relationship with their customers. Moreover, trust plays an important role in influencing consumers' opinions about the altruistic motives behind a company's corporate social responsibility efforts (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). In the context of sustainable fashion, consumers increasingly have the sustainable, as well as the traditional option. However, it rests with them to estimate whether the claim of a sustainable product is true. Frequently, consumers still view that a label signalling the environmental sustainability of a product is "just another green label" for the brand to capture a price premium, or a trick from the marketing or public relations department, also denoted as "perceptions of greenwashing" (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014; Ritch, 2015). This perspective further supports the importance of trust. In accordance with Kang and Hustvedt (2014), we expect the reasoning of the previous two paragraphs to be applicable to the case of the two fast fashion retailers as well and believe that consumers' appraisal of these companies' social responsibility will significantly influence not only their general attitude, but also trust in these brands, which leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1a. Perceptions of social responsibility of sustainability efforts of the two fast fashion brands positively affects consumers' general attitude.
- H1b. Perceptions of social responsibility of sustainability efforts of the two fast fashion brands positively affects consumers' trust.

Purchase intention

An individual's intention to behave in a certain manner could be explained by attitudes towards behaviour, perceptions about social pressure and perceptions about the difficulty of the behaviour (i.e. perceived behavioural control) (Kang *et al.*, 2013). In our empirical setting,

we will examine purchase intention as one manifestation of behavioural intention (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). As previously elaborated, when consumers perceive a company's social responsibility to be credible, they are more likely to have the intention to purchase products from that company (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). Therefore, we hypothesise that if consumers have a positive attitude towards the two fast fashion brands in general, this will also affect their purchase intention towards sustainable clothing products of the two brands:

- H2. Consumers' general attitude positively influences their purchase intention towards the sustainable clothing lines of the two fast fashion brands.

As hypothesised earlier, social responsibility influences the general attitude of consumers, but also their trust towards companies holding their social responsibility promises – in our case, in the form of their sustainable clothing lines – and general attitude is presumably positively related to purchase intention. Logically, trust should also be connected to purchase intention:

- H3. Trust in the two fast fashion brands' sustainable clothing lines positively influences consumers' purchase intention towards these collections.

Environmental concern and perceived consumer effectiveness

Perceived consumer effectiveness is defined as a measure of the individual consumer's judgement of the ability to affect environmental resource problems. For instance, the more consumers feel that they can do something about reducing environmental problems, the more they consider the impact of their purchases (Roberts, 1996). Perceived consumer effectiveness has been consistently documented to influence (environmentally) sustainable consumption decisions and consumer behaviour (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2013). It is a critical antecedent of environmentally conscious consumer behaviour or environmentally conscious buyer behaviour across several fields (Kim and Choi, 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008), as well as the fashion industry (Kang *et al.*, 2013). There are different views of the nature of perceived consumer effectiveness. Although it was initially considered as a measure or element of attitude, it was later argued that perceived consumer effectiveness and attitudes are more effectively measured as two distinct constructs (Berger and Corbin, 1992) – though closely related. However, current literature again discusses perceived consumer effectiveness as an attitude. Furthermore, the former concept has also been categorised as a belief (Kim and Choi, 2005). Recent literature explains that the effect of perceived consumer effectiveness on green purchasing behaviour is mediated by environmentally favourable attitudes (Kang *et al.*, 2013). Perceived consumer effectiveness also needs to be distinguished from the concept of self-efficacy, i.e. a belief in one's capability to organise and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014). While both measure the same in the context of sustainability, self-efficacy focuses on the individual's ability to perform a task rather than necessarily influencing an outcome (i.e. affecting environmental issues). However, the difference is superfluous, as what matters is the feeling of empowerment connected with perceived consumer effectiveness (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014). Furthermore, perceived consumer effectiveness is a better predictor of environmentally conscious consumer behaviour than environmental concern, which is understood as an individual's general orientation towards the environment (Kim and Choi, 2005).

Similarly to pro-environmental beliefs as antecedents of attitudes in the environmental sustainability context, both perceived consumer effectiveness and environmental concern

need to be initialised by some kind of knowledge gathering, and the higher the knowledge, the more distinctive both concepts (Kang *et al.*, 2013). A lack of knowledge or interest for environmental issues can be detrimental (Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009). As environmental concern is also related to an individual's beliefs (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014), and perceived consumer effectiveness can be characterised as a belief itself, we view that perceived consumer effectiveness and environmental concern belong together. Nevertheless, for the reasons stated above, we will more strongly concentrate on perceived consumer effectiveness. Based on Kang *et al.* (2013), we argue that the more consumers feel their individual purchases matter, the more likely they are to purchase sustainable clothes, thus contributing to solve environmental issues. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

- H4. Perceived consumer effectiveness will positively influence consumers' purchase intention towards the two fast fashion retailers' sustainable clothing lines.

Perceptions of social responsibility and perceived consumer effectiveness

Social responsibility presumably positively influences the general attitude of consumers in favour of the two fast fashion brands. Perceived consumer effectiveness is argued to positively influence purchase intention. Although perceived consumer effectiveness is advised to be measured distinctively from consumer attitude, it is nevertheless closely related. This induced us to further pursue the question whether social responsibility could be related to perceived consumer effectiveness, when consumers perceive sustainability efforts of a brand in a positive way, this would enhance their sense of empowerment (i.e. that they feel they could individually make a difference with their purchasing decisions). Accordingly, we postulate our last hypothesis:

- H5. Consumers' perceptions of social responsibility of sustainability efforts of the two fast fashion brands positively affects perceived consumer effectiveness.

Figure 1 depicts our research model.

Method

Measures and sample

The constructs of interest for this study were adapted from existing literature (Table 1). *Social responsibility* was measured with a scale consisting of five items measuring consumers' perception regarding the two fast fashion brands' efforts to support charitable

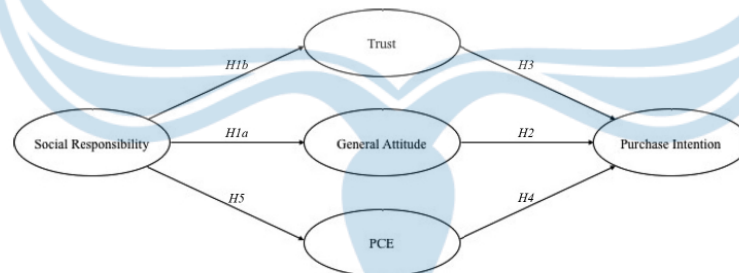


Figure 1.
Illustration of the
research model

Construct	Code/Item	Source
Shopping frequency	SF	Ferraro <i>et al.</i> (2016)
Consumption values	CV1	I can achieve recognition when I own fashionable clothes Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV2	I think people who buy fashionable clothes seem to succeed socially Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV3	I am envious of people who buy fashionable clothes Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV4	When I choose clothing, I consider products' value-to-price ratio important Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV5	I consider how strong and safe products are when I choose products Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV6	I think products' utility is important Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV7	Shopping and looking around stores is an enjoyable pastime for me Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV8	I spend much time researching new clothing because I am interested Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
	CV9	When I purchase clothing I like to fully look around various stores Jung <i>et al.</i> (2016)
Fashion shopping at ZARA and H&M	FS	Have you shopped for clothes at fashion chains like ZARA and H&M before? —
General attitude	AT1	I think ZARA and H&M are very good brands (companies) Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	AT2	I think ZARA and H&M are very useful brands (companies) Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	AT3	My opinion of ZARA and H&M is very favourable Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
Environmental concern	EC1	I am extremely worried about the state of the world's environment and what it will mean for my future Kim and Choi (2005)
	EC2	Mankind is severely abusing the environment Kim and Choi (2005)
	EC3	When humans interfere with nature, it often produces disastrous consequences Kim and Choi (2005)
	EC4	The balance of nature is very delicate and easily upset Kim and Choi (2005)
	EC5	Humans must live in harmony with nature to survive Kim and Choi (2005)
Eco-conscious buyer behaviour	ECBB1	I make every effort to buy paper products made from recycled paper Leary <i>et al.</i> (2014)
	ECBB2	When I purchase products, I always make a conscious effort to buy those products that are low in pollutants Leary <i>et al.</i> (2014)
	ECBB3	I try only to buy products that can be recycled Leary <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Perceptions of social responsibility	SR1	ZARA and H&M are committed to using a portion of their profits to help nonprofits Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	SR2	ZARA and H&M give back to the communities in which they do business Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	SR3	Local institutions benefit from ZARA's and H&M's contributions Kang and Hustvedt (2014)

Table 1.
Constructs and items
of the survey

(continued)

			Fast fashion industry
Construct	Code/Item	Source	
Knowledge of sustainable fashion offering of ZARA and H&M Previous experience with ZARA's Join Life Collection or H&M's Conscious Collection Purchase intention	SR4	ZARA and H&M integrate charitable contributions into their business activities	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	SR5	ZARA and H&M are likely to be interested in corporate giving	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	KSF	How familiar are you with ZARA's Join Life Collection or H&M's Conscious Collection?	—
	EXP	Have you ever bought clothing from ZARA's Join Life Collection or H&M's Conscious Collection?	—
	PI1	It is very likely that I will buy products from ZARA's Join Life Collection or H&M's Conscious Collection	Oberseder <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Trust	PI2	I will purchase products from ZARA's Join Life Collection or H&M's Conscious Collection the next time I need clothing	Oberseder <i>et al.</i> (2013)
	PI3	I will definitely try other products from ZARA's Join Life Collection or H&M's Conscious Collection	Oberseder <i>et al.</i> (2013)
	TT1	ZARA and H&M do not pretend to be something they are not	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	TT2	ZARA's and H&M's product claims are believable	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	TT3	Over time, my experiences with ZARA and H&M have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
Perceived consumer effectiveness	TT4	ZARA and H&M have names you can trust	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	TT5	ZARA and H&M deliver what they promise	Kang and Hustvedt (2014)
	PCE1	Through my personal choices, I can contribute to the solution of environmental issues	Antonetti and Maklan (2014)
	PCE2	My personal actions are significant enough in affecting environmental problems	Antonetti and Maklan (2014)
	PCE3	Environmental issues are affected by my individual choices	Antonetti and Maklan (2014)
	PCE4	Ecological degradation is partly a consequence of my own consumption choices	Antonetti and Maklan (2014)

Table 1.

institutions and their efforts to give back to local communities (e.g. "The brands are committed to using a portion of their profits to help non-profits"). *General attitude* was measured using a three-item scale measuring consumers' general opinion of the two fast fashion retailers (e.g. "I think the two brands are very good brands (companies)"). *Trust* was measured with a five-item scale quantifying the degree to which a consumer believes the two fast fashion retailers will deliver on their promises regarding their sustainable clothing lines (e.g. "Both brands do not pretend to be something they are not") (Kang and Hustvedt, 2014). *Purchase intention* towards the two brands' sustainable collections was measured

using a three-item scale (e.g. "It is very likely that I will buy products from the two brands' sustainable clothing lines") (Öberseder *et al.*, 2013). *Perceived consumer effectiveness* was quantified with a four-item scale measuring the degree to which consumers feel they can individually contribute to solving environmental issues (e.g. "Through my personal choices, I can contribute to the solution of environmental issues") (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014). All items, except for some demographics, were measured based on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Data were collected using a self-administered online survey, distributed via social media. The survey was directed at young consumers between the age of 18 and 35 and mainly targeted young women. However, we did not exclude consumers who did not fit these criteria from participating. Consumers knew about the true identities of the two fast fashion brands for purposes of tangibility. Yet, they remain to be kept anonymous in our survey. At this point, it also needs to be mentioned that we used two fast fashion brands as an example – H&M and Zara – without explicitly distinguishing them. We acknowledge that they might be perceived differently among consumers. However, we used both brands together merely to enhance the chances of brand recognition among our respondents. After removing partially uncompleted responses, a sample of 216 participants (92.5% females) was used for analysis. Regarding age, the participants were distributed as follows: 18–24 years old (38.9%); 25–34 years old (58.8%); 35 years old or above (2.3%). The participants were originally from 29 different countries. The top five nationalities were as follows: 52.8% Chilean, 11.6% German, 9.3% Portuguese, 3.7% Nigerian and 3.2% Spanish.

Analysis

We used SPSS 23 and SmartPLS 3 to conduct our analysis. First, we tested the constructs and items through confirmatory factor analyses to evaluate whether reliability and validity of all model measurements could be ensured. Subsequently, we developed a structural model and tested it to determine the relations among constructs of interest for hypothesis tests via a partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). Figure 2 illustrates the structural model test results.

Results

The measurement model included five latent variables and their indicators. It showed an acceptable fit, with a *standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)* below 0.80 (0.60) (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Given the acceptable fit, we then examined reliability and validity of all measurements. A satisfactory level of reliability was ensured, as both *Cronbach's α* (with values ranging between 0.750 and 0.952) and *composite reliability* exceeded the recommended 0.70 and 0.50 thresholds, respectively (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity was given as well, as all *average variance extracted (AVE)* values were greater than the threshold of 0.50 (ranging between 0.75 and 0.86). We could further confirm discriminant validity, as the square root of each AVE value was larger than other correlation values among the latent variables (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The coefficient of determination (R^2) showed a value of 0.502 for trust, 0.386 for general attitude, 0.086 for perceived consumer effectiveness and 0.395 for purchase intention. This implies that the overall R^2 is not strong, but shows a moderate coefficient of determination, as social responsibility, general attitude and perceived consumer effectiveness together explain about 39.5% of the variance in purchase intention (Chin, 1998).

The relationships and the respective significance between the constructs were determined by examining their path coefficients and *t-statistics* through the bootstrapping procedure, using a two-tailed test with a significance level of 0.05. All constructs are

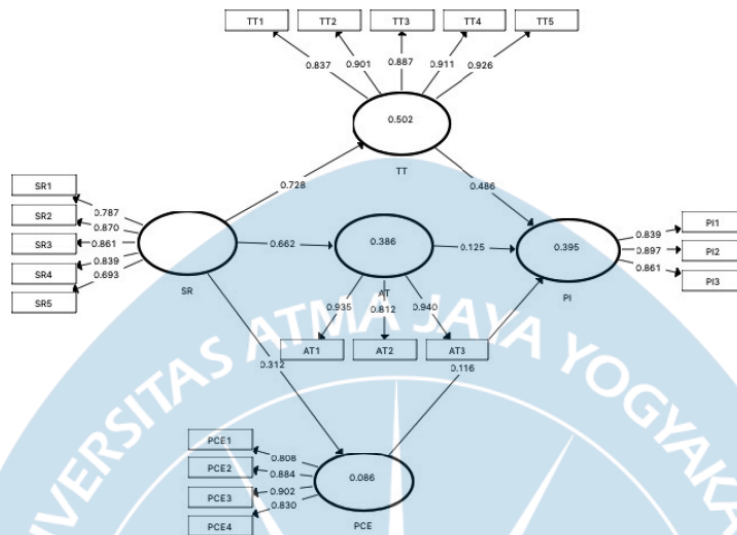


Figure 2.
Illustration of the
structural model test
results

positively related, with the highest path coefficient value between social responsibility and trust (0.782), followed by a path coefficient of 0.662 between social responsibility and general attitude, 0.486 between trust and purchase intention, 0.312 between social responsibility and perceived consumer effectiveness, 0.125 between general attitude and purchase intention and 0.116 between perceived consumer effectiveness and purchase intention. The effects of social responsibility on general attitude ($t = 14.996$, $p < 0.01$) and trust ($t = 16.376$, $p < 0.01$) were both highly significant – hence, *H1a* and *H1b* were supported. However, the influence of general attitude on purchase intention was not significant – thus, *H2* did not find support. The influence of trust on purchase intention ($t = 5.506$, $p < 0.01$) was significant – therefore, *H3* was supported. The influence of perceived consumer effectiveness on consumers' purchase intention towards the two brands' sustainable clothing lines was not significant – as a result, *H4* could not be supported. *H5* addressed that consumers' perceptions of social responsibility of the two brands would positively affect perceived consumer effectiveness. Analysis showed significant results ($t = 4.913$, $p < 0.01$) – consequently, *H5* was supported (Henseler *et al.*, 2009; Wong, 2016). Table 2 shows the *t*-statistics and significance levels for the model tested.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the role of consumer attitude, perceptions about social responsibility of brands, trust and perceived consumer effectiveness in the context of sustainable fashion. To our best knowledge, this study was the first to examine these constructs altogether and to apply them to the case of two real and well-known fashion brands, thus making an important contribution to the field of environmental sustainability in the fashion industry. The results of this study underline that positive perceptions

regarding the two brands' social responsibility efforts not only directly influence what consumers generally think about these brands (i.e. their attitudes), but are also vital in enhancing both consumers' trust towards the brands and their individual feeling of empowerment (i.e. perceived consumer effectiveness) when it comes to environmental issues. Furthermore, consumers' trust is a powerful mechanism to affect purchase intention towards the brands' sustainable clothing lines. Although previous literature has shown general attitude could positively influence consumers' purchase intention, we failed to find support for this connection. One explanation could be the following: although respondents could indicate their general attitude about the two brands, 34.2% of them were (somewhat) not familiar with their sustainable clothing lines. Thus, in these cases, it might have been difficult to then translate attitude directly into purchase intention. Similarly, perceived consumer effectiveness could be positively related to purchase intention in earlier analyses. However, in our setting, this effect was not significant. As nearly half of our respondents (45.8%) had never purchased any clothing of either the two brands' sustainable clothing line before, consumers just might not be ready for purchasing their sustainable clothing, and perceived consumer effectiveness would have been more strongly related to a general form of environmentally conscious consumer behaviour, as opposed to the specific manifestation (purchase intention) in our context.

Limitations

Data for our study were gathered through a self-administered survey and measured consumers' intentions to purchase sustainable clothing, instead of actual behaviour. This bears the risk of social desirability bias – respondents seeking to give the "right" answers they believe to be socially acceptable, which might be different from their behaviour in a real purchase situation (Bray *et al.*, 2011; Carrington *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, regarding the phenomenon of the attitude-behaviour gap, purchase intention translates into actual behaviour in only 30% of the cases (Fennis *et al.*, 2011; Hassan *et al.*, 2016). However, as environmental sustainability is a rather sensitive matter (Carrigan and Attaka, 2001), we considered that a survey served best in guaranteeing our respondents' anonymity. As actual behaviour is quite difficult to operationalise, intention can be used as a proxy (Carrington *et al.*, 2010).

The survey was primarily distributed to young people. Therefore, a generalisation of the findings might be limited. Nevertheless, young consumers are the consumers of tomorrow and are argued to be receptive to sustainable fashion, in terms of awareness and purchasing power. The survey was mainly directed at young women, thus reducing the possibility to generalise our findings. So far, the sustainable clothing lines of the two brands being examined in this work are almost exclusively designed for women, and one brand only recently introduced a unisex collection for both genders. Moreover, females still tend to be more concerned about environmental sustainability than men (Bray *et al.*, 2011).

Table 2.
T-statistics and *p*-
values for the model
tested

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	SD	<i>t</i> -statistics (O/STDEV)	<i>p</i> -values
AT → PI	0.125	0.128	0.090	1.379	0.169
PCE → PI	0.116	0.120	0.061	1.898	0.058
SR → AT	0.662	0.666	0.044	14.996	0.000
SR → PCE	0.312	0.313	0.064	4.913	0.000
SR → TT	0.728	0.729	0.044	16.376	0.000
TT → PI	0.486	0.480	0.088	5.506	0.000

Also, cross-cultural issues might be relevant in a corporate social responsibility context. Specifically, societies with high power distance could be more tolerant towards inequality and less responsive towards corporate (environmental) irresponsibility. Indeed, most of our participants come from high power distance cultures (e.g. Chile and Portugal). According to the Hofstede cross-cultural model, Chilean and Portuguese cultures rank very similar (moderately high) in the “power distance” dimension (Hofstede, 2001). However, we did not find any significant country effect on our dependent variables, as cross-cultural differences tend to dissipate in the presence of a young age sample – particularly, in the fast fashion industry. Moreover, we also included participants from cultures with lower power distance (e.g. Germany).

Implications

We assumed the presence of environmental concern and pro-environmental beliefs as antecedents for attitude and perceived consumer effectiveness. However, recent research found that consumers purchase sustainable goods also for reasons of reinforcing themselves, to signal uniqueness and due to a sense of empowerment through avoiding status or mass-produced goods (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Dopico and Porral, 2012; Ferraro *et al.*, 2016; Vogel and Watchravesringkan, 2017). As these factors are already known to be powerful players in fashion consumption, they should be incorporated when investigating sustainable consumer behaviour in the fashion context as well. Furthermore, we supposed the presence of environmental concern would be followed by consumers willing to – at least partially – translate their concerns into environmentally conscious buyer behaviour. As we failed to find support for the influence of attitude and perceived consumer effectiveness on purchase intention, environmentally conscious buyer behaviour could be incorporated into the model, e.g. as a mediator between these constructs.

Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, our respondents showed a moderate dispersion regarding their nationalities. Attitudes play a role in sustainable fashion consumption and are highly connected to an individual's beliefs, values and social norms, which, in turn, vary from culture to culture (Bly *et al.*, 2015), despite a convergence because of globalisation. Therefore, future research could enrich our model by more strongly incorporating different nationalities and cultures, thus examining whether more diverse (or, alternatively, country-specific) samples regarding nationalities could differ in terms of attitudes towards these two fast fashion brands and the consumption of clothing in general.

To further increase trust among consumers, marketers and managers should communicate environmental sustainability more openly. However, these practitioners should realise that environmental sustainability can be fashionable and fast fashion brands can be sustainable. To increase perceived consumer effectiveness, marketing managers should consider to communicate messages that highlight the ability of individual consumers' contribution to solving environmental problems – e.g. by informing consumers how a single purchase of sustainably produced clothing could add to the well-being of our planet. Lastly, we advise to frame these messages on environmental sustainability in a positive way, as confronting consumers with negative news can lead to confusion and frustration (Bray *et al.*, 2011), possibly harming the effect of perceived consumer effectiveness.

Conclusion

In this research, we began by introducing sustainability, narrowed it down to environmental sustainability and applied it to the fashion setting. Next, we presented the specific constructs of perceptions on social responsibility, general attitude, trust, purchase intention

and perceived consumer effectiveness, which have been consistently reported to occupy an important role in sustainable consumer behaviour. These constructs were subsequently integrated within one model, and data were collected to analyse the underlying relations within that model. We could confirm the relation between perceptions of social responsibility and both general attitude and trust. Also, we found support for the relation between trust and purchase intention, as well as for social responsibility and perceived consumer effectiveness. Unfortunately, we found no support for the hypothesised relation between general attitude and purchase intention, nor for perceived consumer effectiveness and purchase intention. To conclude, we emphasise once more that it is in the best interest of fashion brands, consumers and other stakeholders to get it right in this industry, as the urgency and the resulting benefits are evident. Consequently, more strongly incorporating environmental sustainability should not be viewed as a constraint, but rather as a promising opportunity.

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