

Is high fashion sustainable and does it matter?

An analysis of consumers' implicit cognitions and deep motives.

Prof. Dr. Thorsten Teichert*
Chair of Marketing and
Innovation
Universität Hamburg
Von-Melle-Park 5
20146 Hamburg
Germany
[thorsten.teichert@uni-](mailto:thorsten.teichert@uni-hamburg.de)

Dr. Marike Venter De Villiers
School of Business Sciences
University of Witwatersrand
1 Jan Smuts Avenue
Braamfontein 2000
Johannesburg - South Africa
[marike.venterdevilliers@wits](mailto:marike.venterdevilliers@wits.ac.za)
[.ac.za](mailto:marike.venterdevilliers@wits.ac.za)

Anna-Carina Weickert,
Chair of Marketing and
Innovation
Universität Hamburg
Von-Melle-Park 5
20146 Hamburg
Germany
[annacarina.weickert@uni-](mailto:annacarina.weickert@uni-hamburg.de)
[hamburg.de](mailto:annacarina.weickert@uni-hamburg.de)

*)Corresponding author



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JOHANNESBURG

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Introduction

The 21st century has seen the rise of consumer environmentalism as a mainstream phenomenon in contemporary consumer culture (Hennigs, Karampounioti & Wiedmann, 2016), i.e. both in developed nations as well as in emerging countries. While the issue of sustainability remains a central challenge for all countries and companies around the world, the clothing industry is one of the most polluting industries globally. This is especially prevalent in the luxury fashion industry, which at first glance, appear to be in a stark contrasting relationship with the idea of sustainability: while luxury is often associated with superficial extravagance, sustainability address socially responsible consumption and the protection of natural resources (Brundtland, 1987; Kapferer, Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). As a result, luxury companies have been criticised for controversial working conditions, deforestation and discarded clothing ending in landfills (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2015). Luxury brands are often highly visible targets for social media firestorms (Hansen, Kupfer & Henning-Thurau, 2018) that originates from consumer activists and the rapid diffusion of negative word-of-mouth. Despite the negative association with the luxury fashion industry, brands like Armani, Cartier, Chanel and Gucci are committed to the idea of sustainable fashion (Janssen, Vanhamme, Lindgreen & Lefebvre, 2014). However, not all luxury fashion brands are equally committed to sustainable development (Amatulli, De Angelis, Pino & Guido, 2020) and consumers continue to buy luxury products regardless of the negative stigma associated with it.

One of the barriers to sustainable fashion adoption is the visual appearance and design of the product (Moon, Lai, Lam & Chang, 2015). Sustainable fashion is often made from eco-friendly materials such as hemp or linen, and focus on simple and basic design principles (Niinimaki, 2010). Consumers tend to perceive these sustainable fashion products as being unstylish, unfashionable or unsuited to consumers' needs (Moon et al., 2015). Therefore, despite the fact that consumers profess sustainability concerns, their buying behavior poorly reflects such responsibility (Chan & Wong, 2012; Joy, Sherry Jr, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Thus, the sustainable fashion consumption paradox reflects a state of psychological imbalance amongst (high) fashion consumers. This brings to light the question of whether consumers can perceive high fashion as sustainable and whether this assessment truly matters in their purchase decision.

When addressing this question, companies need to consider different market segments with respect to consumers' attitudes and consumption patterns (Kunz, May & Schmidt, 2020). This is especially prevalent across different countries, where socio-economic and cultural factors play a significant role in consumer decision making. For instance, Peterson and Wilcox (2016) found that higher educated consumers perceive socially responsible luxury brands as more sustainable than less-educated

people. Further, Jain (2019) identified culture, self-orientated (personal) values, other (social) orientated values, and economic values as main drivers of sustainable consumption.

Consumers in developed countries in particular tend to be more concerned about global warming (Dabija, 2018) than those in developing countries. This notion is supported by Hennings, Wiedmann, Klarmann and Behrens (2013) who found that consumer values that drive sustainable fashion differ depending on cultural background. However, the majority of identified empirical research on sustainable fashion consumption has relied on participants who can afford to buy and consume luxury products (Kunz et al., 2020). It is therefore necessary to encourage research on consumption practices amongst different economic status (e.g. developing versus developed economies) to get a full picture of the potential future direction of a more sustainable global fashion industry (Kunz et al., 2020).

This ongoing study employs an experimental approach to gain an in-depth understanding of consumers' view about sustainability within high fashion. It measures implicit associations towards sustainable fashion to reveal consumers' perceptions. These analyses are complemented by an assessment of deep motives (altruism, empathy, compassion and narcissism) to provide broader insights into consumers' view on high fashion. In sum, the following goals are pursued: to measure consumers' motives and implicit associations towards sustainable fashion; to compare the perspectives of young adults in an emerging country (South African) adults and in an European country (Germany); and thirdly, to offer marketers a novel perspective on how to educate contemporary consumers to become more strongly orientated toward sustainable fashion consumption.

Conceptual background: A lack of adoption of sustainable fashion

Sustainable fashion is commonly described as fashion clothes that are less harmful to the environment (Joergens, 2006) and supports the triple bottom line of environmental, social and economic benefits (Elkington, 1997; Thorpe, 2007). It extends throughout the supply chain management process, from raw materials to sourcing, production, distribution, retailing and consumption (Belz & Peattie, 2010). For fashion apparel to be sustainable, its manufacturing process must meet current environmental, economic, and social needs without compromising future generations (Brundtland, 1987).

Over the last couple of years, consumer demands for brands that pay attention to social and environmental issues have increased and consumers increasingly portray preference for brands that are sustainable and socially responsible (Lai, Chiu, Yang & Pai, 2010). As a result, the growth in ethical consumption behaviour in sustainable fashion is becoming more evident and consumers are increasingly paying attention to the harmful effects of the luxury fashion industry on the environment. Several fashion brands have embraced the sustainable trend and this market continues to grow (Co-operative Bank Ethical Consumerism Report, 2012).

However, the adoption of sustainable fashion has been slow so far. It remains a challenge to fully understand the drivers of consumers' decisions when purchasing fashion products. Most literature on this topic provides evidence that fashion consumption is driven by personal values such as self-expression, aesthetic obligations and group conformity (Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Consumers regard clothing as a means to express their own values and opinions, while providing them with an enhanced self-esteem. Fashion choice is thus internally driven whereby the selection allows them to portray their individuality amidst a homogenous society (Lundblad & Davies, 2015). Such subjective perceptions need not consciously reflected by consumers but can be characterized as implicit drivers of overt behavior.

Furthermore, choosing sustainable products is an altruistic behavior and consumers therefore experience a state of motivational conflict (Torelli, Monga & Kaikati, 2011). Conflicting views are evident. In a study conducted by Jagel, Keeling, Reppel and Gruber's (2012), which is a rare example of motivation-driven research, it was reported that relatively high levels of altruistic values drive fashion consumption, as opposed to high levels of self-identity as motivators for consumption. This goes against the dominant discourse on fashion consumption, which dictates that individuals purchase fashion to fulfill their need for belonging, self-esteem and to demonstrate a certain social standing (Belk, 1985; Richins, 1994; Easy, 2002). Thus, an analysis of consumers' sustainability perceptions needs to be complemented by an analysis of their deep motives.

In the following, we outline how we address both research questions: "Is high fashion perceived as sustainable (1) and does it matter (2)".

RQ1 ("Is high fashion sustainable...?"): Sustainability perceptions of high fashion

While the first impression matters for many product categories, this clearly matters for fashion items that are dependent upon a holistic visual impression. Consumers are likely to perceive fashion to be sustainable or not before they (seldomly) inspect the material or investigate supply chain issues. Implicit associations describe such mental processes that occur subconsciously and which influences an individual's perception, judgement and action (Nosek, Hawkins & Frazier, 2011). By measuring implicit cognition it is possible to assess mental constructs such as attitudes, stereotypes, self-esteem and self-concepts, which is distinct from explicit self-reporting (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit measures clarify different aspects of behaviour that are not accounted for by the corresponding explicit measures (Nosek et al., 2011). Regarding its application, there is evidence that implicit measures, compared to introspectively derived explicit measures, is a more accurate means for assessing people's motivation and ability to report mental content due to a lack of conscious awareness (Nosek et al., 2011; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). This seems to be of special relevance in the context of fashion, given the hedonic and often impulsive nature of fashion purchases.

In sustainability research, methods are often limited to the assessment of explicit attitudes by means of questionnaires, interviews, case-study research and observations (Salas-Zapata et al., 2013; Spangenberg, 2011). Traditional methods collect data solely on the explicit knowledge of individuals, which is often biased by factors such

as social desirability and impression management (Steiner, Geissler, Shreder & Zenk, 2018). The application of implicit measures could therefore prove to be more accurate than measuring explicit behaviours. Past studies have used implicit measures to focus on consumer attitudes and product preferences, such as recycling behaviour and consumers' attitude towards carbon footprint information (Beattie & Sale, 2011; Geng, Liu, Xu, Zhou & Fang, 2013; Messner & Vosgerau, 2010; Prestwich, Hurling & Baker, 2011). The results have provided evidence that there are positive relationships between implicit attitudes and brand choices (Messner & Vosgerau, 2009), recycling behaviour (Geng et al., 2013) and environmentally friendly food shopping (Beattie & Sale, 2011). For instance, no significant correlations were found between explicit attitudes and the eye fixation of participants on the footprint information. However, participants with a strong positive implicit attitude toward the environment and unconscious patterns of eye movement. Accordingly, we measure implicit associations towards high fashion to reveal whether it is perceived as sustainable or not.

Hypothesis 1: Consumers' implicit cognitions influence their perceptions about high fashion sustainability.

RQ 2 (“... and does it matter”): Relevance of sustainability as motive for (high) fashion consumption

Deep motives for consumers purchasing luxury brands root back to their personality traits. Traditionally these consumers have been depicted as individuals who mainly aim to satisfy their need for status and conspicuous consumption (Han, Nunes & Dreze, 2010; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Beside signaling status, power and wealth to others (Han, Nunes & Dreze, 2010), luxury products offer consumers unique experiences and positive emotions (Berger & Ward, 2010; Dion & Borraz, 2017). Luxury products is in fact a multi-dimensional construct whereby consumers purchase by both internal motivations such as inner values, self-reward, and self-expression, as well as external values, such as status signaling, symbolism, conspicuous consumption and exclusivity (Eastman & Eastman, 2015; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Luxury products are therefore a means to distinguish oneself from the masses and portray a unique identity (Amatulli et al., 2020). A different set of personality traits relates to sustainable fashion. Besides narcissism, altruism, empathy and compassion can also describe consumers' traits supporting the consumption of sustainable fashion.

The role of altruism in sustainable fashion consumption

Consumers with strong altruistic values judge issues on the basis of costs to benefits for other people such as family and friends, the community, a social network, or the humanity in general (Stern, Doetz & Kalof, 1993). They tend to focus on people other than themselves and perceive themselves as interconnected with others, while being driven by the desire to avoid harmful consequences for others (Schultz, 2000). Against this backdrop, altruism can be defined as a behavioural disposition that is aimed at the personal wellbeing of others, treating others fairly and maximizing others' benefits (Powers & Hopkins, 2006). In the context of sustainability, altruism supports pro-environmental behavior (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2011) while reflecting moderate consumption of natural resources (De Young, 1996; Iwata, 2001). Altruistic

consumers are therefore more likely to recommend and buy (even at a premium price) products and services from luxury brands that participate in philanthropic efforts.

The role of empathy in sustainable fashion consumption

Empathy disposition refers to empathic arousal or emotional arousal states and is based on the interest and understanding of others (Cuff et al, 2016). It is often treated as a concept that includes behavioural, social and relational empathy which is based on the interest and understanding of others (Kim & Lee, 2018; Ock, 2016), while it directly translates into consumers' attitudes and buying behaviour (Escala & Stern, 2003). Within the context of consumption, empathy is closely related to altruistic behaviour, and increases the intention to purchase eco-friendly products (Lee, 2014). Consumers with higher levels of empathy had higher purchase intentions of fair trade products than those with low levels of empathy (Zerbini, Vergura & Luceri, 2019).

The role of compassion in sustainable fashion consumption

Compassion refers to the concrete feeling for the suffering of others and similarly to altruism, it is an other-orientated emotion that is elicited when seeing others suffer (Lazarus, 1991). Against the backdrop of considering both compassion and altruism, compassion differs in its quality as an emotional response to a specific situation compared with an abstract moral basis of decision making (Geiger & Keller, 2017). Compassion is therefore more than altruism and evidently portray pro-environmental intentions (Pfattheicher, Sassenrath & Schindler, 2015). The role of compassion in fashion consumption is evident in that consumers are willing to pay a higher price for fairly produced clothes rather unethically manufactured clothing (Geiger & Keller, 2017). Compassion therefore a dominant driver of sustainable consumption within the context of fashion (Geiger & Keller, 2017).

The role of narcissism in sustainable fashion consumption

Narcissism is commonly referred to as the notion of self-absorption, alienation of others, persistent manifested pattern of grandiosity, being self-focused and a sense of self-importance (Emmons, 1987). They are usually preoccupied by dreams of their own success, power and brilliance (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). Narcissists portray low levels of altruism and therefore display a lack of regard for green consumption practices. Consumers with high levels of narcissism are deeply and inherently indifferent about any potential benefits that their green behaviours might confer to others (Naderi & Strutton, 2015).

Hypotheses 2: Consumers' personality dimensions of altruism, empathy, compassion positively influence the relevance of sustainability issues in purchasing high fashion products, while narcissism diminishes it.

Research methodology

In sustainability research, implicit cognitive measures are still at its' early stages, especially within the field of fashion consumption. Traditional methods such as surveys lack detailed insight and information on implicit measures (Steiner et al., 2018), especially in view of hidden drivers of human behaviour (Teichert, Graf, Rezaei, Worfel & Duh, 2019). These techniques can hardly retrieve implicit cognition processes (Teichert et al., 2019) and factors such as social desirability may easily

contribute to biased answers (Brunel, Tietje & Greenwald, 2004). In light of this, consumer preference can be measured more accurately by applying alternative measures that focus on cognitive processing either *directly* or *implicitly* (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Individuals perform tasks congruent with their implicit cognitions faster, while tasks that are incompatible with their implicit cognitions take a bit longer. This is mainly due to the fact that cognitive resources need to be activated when there are no existing memory traces (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

This study tests the first hypothesis by measuring consumer's implicit perceptions of regular versus high fashion products, in relation to being sustainable or not. The two object categories are 'regular fashion' versus 'high fashion' with two association categories, 'sustainable' versus 'unsustainable'. The data will be gathered by utilizing the Ask your Brain (AYB) research platform as software for the implicit cognition measurement. The AYB platform is user-friendly with a game-like graphic layout, which makes it attractive to participants. Due to the current challenges faced by COVID-19, this study will entail an online implementation of implicit cognition measurements. However, it also allows for a cost-efficient and timely execution with the opportunity to reach a broader audience (Teichert et al., 2019). Participants are asked to categorise pictures of clothing according to their visual appeal into association categories of being sustainable or not. Given that former studies revealed millennials' sensitivity (Kapferer, Michaut-Denizeau, 2020) as well as cross-cultural effects in the evaluation of sustainability and fashion (Dekhili, Achabou & Alharbi, 2019), we purposefully focus on young adults and compare European (German) and (South) African perspectives.

These perception measures are complemented by an in-depth measurement of individual consumers' personality traits, being altruism, empathy, compassion and narcissism to test the second set of hypotheses. Here, we adapted established scales for measuring these personality dimensions. Once the surveys have been completed, the researchers will analyse them using STATA as multivariate software packages. **While the survey is currently still ongoing, we aim to present and discuss our empirical insights at the conference.**

Significance of contribution

This study employs an experimental approach to measure consumers' implicit cognition towards the sustainable appearance of a product (being a high fashion product or a timeless fashion product). This is of particular relevance as most decision-making occurs without the individual being aware of them (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner & Schmitt, 2005). Implicit cognition measures therefore allow the researchers to gain insight into the sub-conscious decision-making process of consumers. From a theoretical perspective, this idea of unconscious decision-making can be better understood by applying implicit cognitive measures, which is still in its' early stages within the field of sustainable fashion consumption.

This research is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on consumers' implicit cognition when making fashion choices. Secondly, it provides insight into the values that motivate consumers when making fashion decisions. Thirdly, few studies within the field of sustainable fashion has used implicit cognitive measures to understand individuals' consumption behaviour better. Lastly, it provides

marketers with crucial insight into how to bridge the attitude-behaviour gap within the context of sustainable fashion consumption.

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