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How do Millennials Reconcile their Consumption of Fast Fashion with Ethical Concerns?

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ABSTRACT

The domination of ‘fast fashion’ retailers in the contemporary fashion industry is due to their ability to deliver style-conscious product ranges in minimal time, satisfying consumer lifestyle preferences for continuous change. As consumers of fast fashion, Millennials are also considered a socially conscious group, taking on a more substantial role in the growth of ethical consumerism. This study attempts to address the dichotomy between their fast fashion consumption behavior and concern for ethical issues by identifying the strategies these consumers take to rationalize this ‘ethical purchasing gap’.

Keywords: Fast fashion, consumption behavior, ethical consumerism, Millennials

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past decade and a half, the modern fashion industry has seen the rise of retailers such as Zara, H&M, Forever 21 and Primark, all of whom have adopted the ‘fast fashion’ business strategy. This concept is characterized by the constant refreshment of trend-conscious, affordable products, in which retailers adapt to changing consumer demand by delivering products within weeks (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). The social and environmental impact of these fast-paced production cycles have received greater attention, specifically the adoption of unethical practices along production lines. At the same time, consumers have demonstrated a stronger interest in sustainability and ethics. While ethical consumerism has gained considerable following among Millennial consumers, the same target group of fast fashion retailers, there remains the existence of what has been termed the ‘ethical purchasing gap’. This gap refers to the inability of consumer intentions toward ethical consumption to translate into action (Sadachar & Manchiraju, 2014, p. 2). Several studies (McNeill & Moore, 2015), (Joergens, 2006), and (Shen, Wang, Lo, & Shum, 2012) corroborate the existence of this phenomenon, yet few study the gap in the context of fast fashion consumption. This study will attempt to address this gap while examining Millennial awareness of the ethical issues sustainability initiatives specific to the industry, their relationship and interaction with the phenomenon, and their intentional and subsequent consumption behavior.

The next section provides an overview of literature, while subsequent sections will establish and expand upon the research question, detailing the methodology and results/discussion of the study. Finally, the conclusion, consisting of the limitations and suggestions for further research, will follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Infrastructure of the 'Fast Fashion' Business Model

The advent of fast fashion began as the result of dynamics such as market globalization, consumer lifestyle changes, and technological innovation, in which haute-couture and ready-to-wear collections of traditional luxury houses and large retailers of basic designs saw new competition from retailers who could rapidly produce designs that mimicked fashion runway shows for a fraction of the price (Djelic & Ainamo, 1999). Though the fashion calendar has typically consisted of Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter collections, consumers began to view apparel as items that represented the unique and fluid lifestyle they strived for (Djelic & Ainamo, 1999). In response, retailers began offering diverse product ranges available almost immediately to satisfy consumer needs for instant gratification and constant change, thus expanding the traditional fashion calendar into several more seasons (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

This environment of continuous change has obvious effects on supply chain management of fast fashion retailers. The importance of maintaining a highly-responsive supply chain to make deliveries as frequent as possible, while first incorporating real-time sales and market data and applying these to the design, procurement, and production mean retailers have spent a significant amount of effort creating an information-driven infrastructure characterized by highly flexible and collaborative supply chains (Toktali, 2008). Because the idea of fast fashion is predicated upon the incorporation of constantly changing trends and demand into design and production to beat ready-to-wear designers to the shelves, an information-driven supply chain model has proved successful for companies like Zara (Toktali, 2008).

Supply Chain Implications

Since the apparel industry is highly labor-intensive, cost minimization has led retailers to sub-contract garment production to overseas firms of partially industrialized countries (Li, Zhao, Shi, & Li, 2014). Due to technological advancements responsible for the production of diverse clothing styles in shorter runs, retailers adopted the strategy of offering smaller quantities of changing, fashionable styles. This resulted in the practice of global outsourcing to countries such as China, Morocco, Turkey (Toktali, 2008). As manufacturing is outsourced to countries with reduced labor costs, an intricate network of subcontractors has created difficulty in retailer awareness and control of possible worker exploitation (Perry, Wood, & Fernie, 2014). According to Hobbes, it is a common practice in the garment industry for brands to outsource to mega suppliers who are then responsible for coordinating production among thousands of factories without owning or operating any of them. The mega supplier Li & Fung, for example, has been blamed for incidents ranging from worker deaths in Bangladesh to malnourishment and air contamination in Cambodia. Because these mega suppliers allocate production to thousands of factories, it is difficult for to trace which factories are responsible for the production of specific designs (Hobbes, 2015).

Retailer-Specific Behavior

In the case of low cost fast fashion production, supplier pressure to deliver has created greater compliance implications. The nature of the fast fashion model aggravates the risks of human rights infringements within the complex supply chains, in which there is less oversight on second and third tier suppliers when suppliers must fulfill unanticipated orders under tight deadlines (Gaynor & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). Due to subcontracting arrangements, Inditex, the largest fast fashion retailer in the world, was recently implicated in violating human labor rights

in Brazil (Theuws, 2015). Brazilian government inspectors described working conditions for immigrant workers sewing clothes for Zara as “analogous to slavery” (Campos, Huijstee, & Theuws, 2015, p. 5). These workers were found to have been working up to 16 hour shifts while not being permitted to leave the workshop and at the same time receiving illegal deductions on their wages. Another report by the Cambodian NGO Center for Alliance of Labor & Human Rights (CENTRAL) found that three of the H&M’s “gold” suppliers and one “platinum” supplier were guilty of violating the company’s practices of fair wages as workers were found to have earned well below the industry average. Another report related to H&M’s practices found that, “By outsourcing the work to a subcontractor, factory 1 was able to bypass labor law provisions governing overtime wages and a compensatory day off for night shifts or Sunday...the factory employed some children below the legally permissible age of 15, and that those children were made to work as hard as the adults.” (Kashyap, 2015, p. 20)

Increased media attention on unethical practices within the fast fashion industry has resulted in retailer incorporation sustainable practices and social responsibility within their supply chains. Companies considered to be socially responsible are those that address and attempt to mitigate the social and environmental impact of their operations voluntarily (Li, Zhao, Shi, & Li, 2014). As such behavior contributes to increased competitiveness and enhanced reputation, fast fashion retailers have taken significant steps toward the application of such behavior (Li, Zhao, Shi, & Li, 2014). Fast fashion retailers have documented in their corporate reports their emphasis on supply chain traceability, with Inditex for example, requiring factories to be registered by suppliers so the retailer may monitor production capacity and minimize the risk of outsourcing (Inditex, 2015, p. 34).

Millennials and Ethical Consumerism

Apparel companies have adopted these socially responsible and sustainable practices as ethical consumption or ethical consumerism gained following in the late 1980s. Ethical consumerism is characterized by a strong concern for the “environment, animal welfare, fair trade, human rights, fair wages and self-interested health concerns” (Sadachar & Manchiraju, 2014, p. 2). The past three decades have seen an increase in demand for ethical options in the marketplace with the ethical fashion movement encompassing clothing companies that apply this “fashion with a conscience” ideal, specifically in their efforts to ethically source garments by incorporating fair trade principles (Joergens, 2006, p. 3).

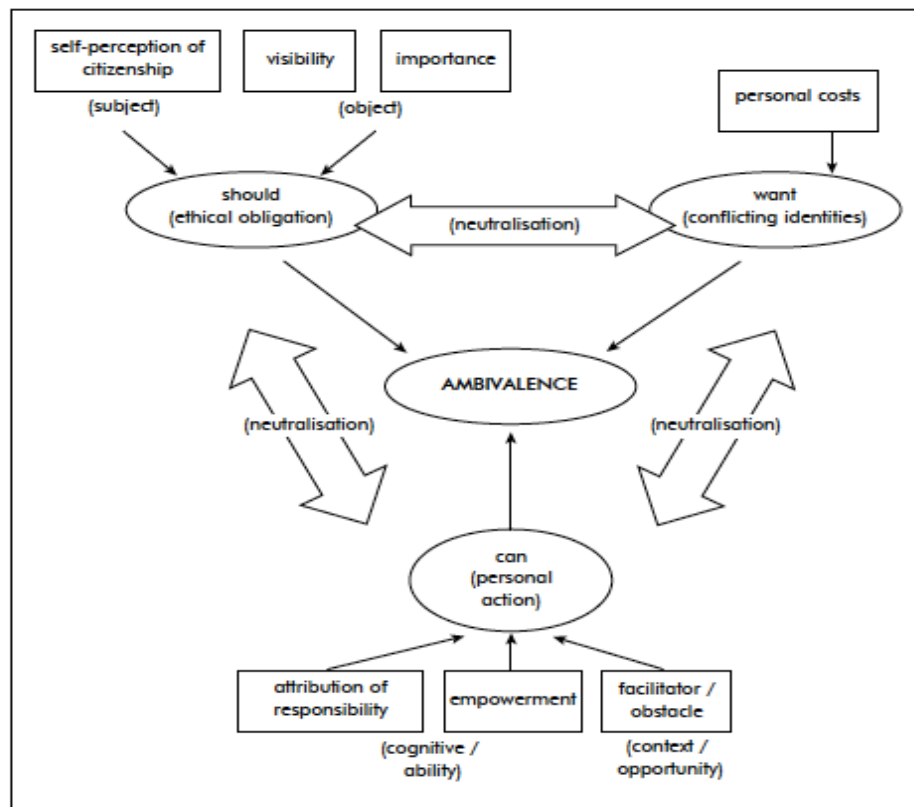
The Generation Y Market, also referred to as the Millennial group, are those consumers “born between 1985 and 1999” (Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012, p. 1). Because they were born into a world characterized by “international interdependence and global engagement”, they are responsive to these ethical concerns, are “socially, culturally and environmentally conscious” (Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012, p. 2). At the same time, these consumers are also characterized for their values of “self-gratification” and their demand for constant change, growing up in a world of “networked communication and rapid information exchange” (Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012, p. 2). Thus, those Millennials between the ages of 16-27 years old, particularly driven by trends and constant change, are considered a significant target segment for the fast fashion industry (Hines & Bruce, 2007).

Ethical Purchasing Gap and the ‘Ambivalence Model’

Although the ethical consumerism movement has taken shape within the fashion industry, various studies identify the existence of a gap between consumer intentions to purchase ethically and actual behavior (McNeill & Moore, 2015); (Shen, Wang, Lo, & Shum, 2012); (Joergens,

2006). However, there exists little literature on the explanations for this ethical purchasing gap. In her research, Valor applies forms model centered around a core category titled ambivalence to help explain “cognition, motivation, and behavior” (Valor, 2007, p. 1) and the interaction of the categories defined as ethical obligation, conflicting identities, and personal action to explain how consumers utilize and apply information of labor violations in their decision-making process. Ethical obligation consists of self-perception of citizenship and visibility and importance of specific issues to the consumer. The category of conflicting identities relates to the symbolic value of clothing, while personal action consists of responsibility and empowerment. In her model, these three categories are centered around the core category of ambivalence and consist of the following sub-components. See Figure 1 below (Valor, 2007, p. 5).

FIGURE 1 Labour abuses in clothes shopping. Core category and subcategories.



Ambivalence is meant to describe the conflict over how to behave and is related to the concept of cognitive dissonance or the “arousal that occurred in people when their beliefs did not fit together” (Valor, 2007, p. 12), forcing them to engage in ‘neutralization strategies’ that “soften or eliminate” (Valor, 2007, p. 13) this conflict. These strategies describe how consumers reduce the tension between their perceptions of ethical obligation and consumption behavior. In the next section, the research question will be defined with the application of this model and explained accordingly.

DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

Fast fashion retailers have focused their competitive advantage on offering low price, trend-sensitive products that satisfy consumer demand for “continuous change” (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 2). At the same time, consumers from Generation Y have shown an increasing concern for “global issues” (Hill & Lee, 2015, p. 13) . The growth in fast fashion consumption and the accompanying ethical implications signifies an importance in understanding the paradox between the fast fashion business model and the rise of ethical consumerism.

Considering the contradicting implications of fast fashion consumption and Millennial concern for ethical issues and social responsibility (Hill & Lee, 2015), the research question has been formed with the aim of understanding the ethical purchasing gap within this context. The necessity for supply chains to quickly adapt to changing consumer demands have an impact on labor practices, proving Valor’s research on the influence of information related to unethical labor practices relevant. This study explores the causes behind this gap in Millennials’ consumption of fast fashion in adaptation to the *Ambivalence Model* introduced in the previous section.

Thus, the primary research objective is to identify the neutralization strategies adopted by Millennials to minimize the conflict between their ethical concerns and actions. In other words, considering the dissonance between the implications of fast fashion consumption and those of sustainability and ethics, how do Millennials reconcile their behavior with their ethical concerns?

METHODOLOGY

Because the research question takes on a more exploratory nature, qualitative-based research through in-depth interviews was considered the most appropriate form of data collection. This allows for the identification of individual perspectives of a phenomenon, in which responses are context-specific and unique to the interviewee (McNeill & Moore, 2015) (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).

Data was collected from the semi-structured interviews of 11 participants. The interviewees were selected based upon a convenience sampling method, with the criteria being a representative sample of ages within the target Millennial age group, and diverse nationalities and occupations. The profiles of interview participants are included in Appendix A. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, university, and public cafés, were audio-recorded with the consent of participants, and transcribed verbatim. Questions were developed and ordered based upon the categories of ethical obligation, personal action and conflicting identities of the *Ambivalence Model* in a way that allowed for an examination of perceptions and behavior to help identify the neutralization strategies engaged in by participants. The model was used because of its consideration of the “symbolic consumption” of clothing, allowing for the examination of the possible differences with fast fashion apparel.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim (Appendix B) and coded in accordance with the coding paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which consisted of the first phase of open coding followed by axial coding. The second phase of analysis entailed grouping significant codes and categories, while identifying major relationships which formed the basis of the neutralization strategies. A diagram grouping significant codes into the relevant categories are included in Appendix C.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews yielded the following results and analysis is divided into the three applicable categories.

Ethical Obligation

Participants were asked to first define their perceptions of citizenship, understanding of the term ‘ethical’ in relation to fashion consumption, and knowledge of ethical issues within the industry. The following themes and neutralization strategies were identified:

Perception of Citizenship: Awareness of the Global Community

When asked to articulate their perception of global citizenship, answers revolved around maintaining an awareness of the welfare of others. One participant states, it encompasses “being aware of your rights, being aware where your rights end and where another person’s rights end” (P4) and “being thoughtful of other people, being mindful, contributing to the community, being a generally upstanding citizen” (P8). In the context of fast fashion, participants claimed being a ‘good citizen’ means purchasing clothes known to have been produced under fair working conditions. Participant 9 offers a more sophisticated response claiming a good citizen “incorporate(s) in purchasing decisions the whole supply chain so for the production companies ensuring that human rights are respected and that the environment is protected”, while Participant 10 interprets this to mean “not buying at Zara and H&M and all those producers which produce in low cost countries”. On a similar note, most participants interpret the term ‘ethical’ to imply the consideration of human rights in the production process, though few participants mention animal rights. Participant 8 offered a unique understanding stating that the term forces the consideration of “what kind of things they support. If I know a company is against gay rights and they are spending money on supporting organizations that are working against gay rights, I won’t support

them.” To relate these perceptions of good citizenship to their actual consumption behavior, participants were asked about their knowledge of retailer-specific conduct, both ethical and unethical, to identify and confront participants about any gaps between their perception of citizenship and subsequent purchasing behavior. The following theme was identified:

Basic Awareness of Ethical Issues and Socially Responsible Behavior

Working conditions in third world countries, specifically child labor and unfair wages, were the ethical issues most identified by participants. When asked to name retailer-specific examples, participants 1, 2, 4, and 11 referenced the same story of an ‘SOS’ note found on Primark product. Participant 5 also identified Primark’s harsh treatment of cashiers as an ethical issue he recently became aware. Participants all identified Facebook as their primary source of this negative news. Participant 2 claimed she watched a documentary exposing Inditex, one she happened upon while scrolling through TV channels. Participants 4, 9, and 10 said received some exposure from interactions with informed friends.

Similarly, none of the participants intentionally visited company websites to study corporate social responsibility behavior, nor searched for information regarding unethical behavior. Only Participant 4 provided a general example of H&M’s adoption of sustainable packaging and fabric because of her preference for online shopping and thus her exposure to the company website. No other participant could name a specific initiative, although two participants were aware of Patagonia’s corporate social responsibility efforts. Though all participants were aware of possible unethical working conditions abroad, they attribute it to common knowledge that they obtained from the media and friends throughout their lives.

These answers characterize participants as primarily passive consumers of news and company practices. Although all participants believe that labor outsourcing to low cost countries

creates several ethical issues that the public should be aware of, only Participant 9 claims to make efforts toward educating himself. There is a contradiction between participants' general view of citizenship and the passive role participants take to educate themselves. It is interesting to note that when some participants were asked how they considered ethical issues when making purchasing decisions, they claim that these issues do not actually take priority because they lack substantial information to act accordingly. Participant 8 offers his explanation, "...the mistreatment of workers and these you know, hidden ethical issues.... you don't know which companies are doing it and which companies aren't. So for me as a consumer, it doesn't really impact how I purchase things because I don't know which companies are the ones doing it. If I did find out that a company was mistreating their workers or mistreating animals, I definitely would not purchase from them."

The visibility of ethical issues seemed to influence opinions and attitudes toward retailers and consumption behavior. Some participants who have had this specific exposure, though involuntary, to ethical issues within the industry, formed stronger opinions that affected their intentions to purchase ethically. For example, several participants noted how the incomprehensibly low prices of Primark products forced them to think about potential unethical working conditions. Participant 1 states, "How much did the people who actually produced it get from those 3 euros?", while Participant 9 says, "In general, Primark I avoid. I never bought anything there. I think it's so cheap, it can't be good in opinion. I've never bought anything there."

While participants claim they need more information to change their consumption behavior, the majority are unwilling to intentionally educate themselves. This led to the identification of the following neutralization strategy:

Neutralization Strategy: Selectively Appropriating Attention

To minimize the tensions between these ethical considerations and behavior, it is evident that many of the participants adopt the strategy of the selective appropriation of attention. Participant 4 explains, “I’m afraid of what I’m going to see... They (consumers) don’t just don’t look for it because they know they are going to have to think about it and they will not feel good about it. It also goes against the concept of fast fashion when you go in and usually people buy that kind of stuff to feel better about themselves.” On a similar note, Participant 10 states, “It’s also more comfortable to close your eyes to see the fact that you are living a very good life compared to people who live a very bad life and reading tons of paper and sites, people don’t have a lot of time and spending it on ethical issues is a big order.” Participants refuse to intentionally expose themselves to specific sources of information related to corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and/or unethical behavior, focusing only on negative media seen while casually browsing social media.

Personal Identity

Participants were also questioned about their motivations and preferences when purchasing clothing to discern the depth of the relationship between clothing with their personal identity. The following theme was identified:

Specific Pull of Fast Fashion Apparel: Accessibility Due to Price and Style

Fast fashion apparel provides participants with instant access to an ideal identity, image, and emotional state due to its low price. For Participants 1, 2, and 10 who view fashion and clothes shopping as leisure-time activity, their preference for a specific retailer, primarily Zara, is due to style and quality. Participant 2 states, “They look more expensive, I think. They look better than the other stores... they make the same clothes as designer clothes but in a cheaper way.” Having

new clothing that reflect the latest styles are important for Participant 1 says, “It’s nice to have new stuff, to try new things. It’s nice to see myself.”, while Participant 10 says one of her motivations for visiting Zara is to buy stylish clothing for public events. Participant 2 and 4 relate this to the role of social media in creating a pressure to adopt the latest styles. Participant 2 states, “The bloggers (fashion) say that this is a trend now. You are not a consumer in the beginning but you will be because they say it is a fad because it is not a trend until someone says that it is a trend.” These participants acknowledge the role of clothing on identity and image by emphasizing the priority of keeping up with new styles, with fast fashion offering a cheaper avenue to attain this ideal self. This societal pressure will be further expanded upon in the next category of personal action. The trend factor combined with the affordable prices seem to create an identity conflict between participants’ concern for others and importance of self-image. Participants adopt the following strategy to mitigate this:

Neutralization Strategy: Appealing to Financial Constraints to Minimize Priority of Self

Participants identify the financial constraints of their current occupation as the obstacle that prevents them from acting according to their beliefs. In Participant 1’s case, she “wishes” she could purchase clothing ensured to have been produced under fair working conditions but her status as a student holds her back. However, upon being asked how this would change when she begins working, she says she would “not stop shopping at Zara” but would stop shopping at other fast fashion stores saying, “Probably, I would not go to Primark that much.” Though she defines price as the obstacle preventing her from changing her behavior, even with the elimination of this constraint, she selectively applies her ethical concerns in a way that does not interfere with the preference she has for Zara products and its impact on her image. After being questioned if she would limit her consumption in 10 years assuming a higher salary, she reasons, “10 years from

now I will not need so much clothes anymore.” This reveals that her future willingness to adjust her consumption behavior is not in fact due to the assumed salary increase, but rather what may be interpreted as an expectation that fashion will not play as large of a role on her image and identity in the future.

Similarly, Participant 2 two claims that it is “impossible” to act as a good citizen in fashion because she currently lacks the money. She uses this as justification for not educating herself on ethical and unethical practices of retailers and the industry, despite claiming that she feels a responsibility to protect the rights of others in the global community. By utilizing this strategy, she avoids exposure to reduce the tension created by a prioritization of her stated addiction to fashion and clothing. This indicates that some participants make efforts to act according to their ethical beliefs, but in a manner that preserves their self-identity and image to achieve balance, using their monetary constraints to minimize the conflict created by their prioritization of self.

Personal Action

The third category of questions related to participants’ attribution of responsibility for solving the ethical issues within the industry. While all participants agree that responsibility lies upon governments, consumers, and retailers, all participants agree that consumers have the ultimate responsibility of enacting change within the fashion industries and as P7 believes, consumers should “not only be more aware but actually care.” Other participants’ opinions differ in their level of expectation from governments and retailers to enforce change. Participant 4 believes governments have considerably more power “because they are the mid-layer between citizens and the companies; They kind of have a little bit more power to put a stop to it.”, while Participant 7 attributes more responsibility to retailers “because with the government, it is hard to coordinate if things are produced in one country and dissembled in another.” Still, all participants

recognize the effect of the mobilization of consumer activism. To reduce the tension between these beliefs and their inability to act accordingly, the following neutralization strategy was identified:

Neutralization Strategy: Minimizing Perception Power

By appealing to the state of societal values, participants justify their inability to apply ethical concerns to purchasing behavior. Participant 4 believes the obstacles preventing the industry from becoming more ethical is “Consumerism, capitalism all of the isms of the world.” She identifies the complexity of the problem by highlighting that people are driven “by what is trendy now...people should be taught to have their own style”, believing that this “is an issue you are never going to solve because that’s what fashion is about”, particularly in fast fashion. Participant 10 offers his opinion, “ I think it’s a societal problem. I think it is often that if you buy a dress for going out, you want to wear it once and not wear it again. If you want to go to a new party, you want a new one”, acknowledging the fast fashion industry’s exploitation of this. Participant 2, after being questioned as to whether she would be willing to change her consumption behavior reasons that she thinks “they (fast fashion stores) are all the same, even the high-quality stores like Louis Vuitton, they are kind of like that, you know. I think it is fashion.” Similarly, Participant 10 believes, “Louis Vuitton, I think they are claiming that they are producing in Italy or Paris, I’m not sure. In fact, the thing is that the very last step is produced there. Everything else is produced in low-income countries so I’m not sure if they are so much better.” These participants claim that they would behave differently if they had more money, yet they acknowledge a belief that because this seems to be an industry wide problem, they would have a similar contribution whether or not they changed their behavior as they would be contributing to the problem either way. It is evident that participants are overwhelmed by this realization and are unsure how to

tackle such issues because of the complexity of the problem, hindering them from incorporating their ethical beliefs into their purchasing decisions.

CONCLUSION

The study identified three strategies: the appeal to the perceived obstacle of salary and low apparel cost, the selective appropriation of attention as passive consumers of information and news, and the minimization of perceived power due to the complex values of society and capitalism. By attempting to identify how consumers justify their fast fashion consumption behavior with their apparent ethical perceptions and values, the research question sought to understand some complexities specific to a new phenomenon for which little literature exists. However, the following are limitations and suggestions for further research:

Limitations

The qualitative nature of the study meant the evaluation of interview transcripts, formation of codes and derived themes and strategies were dependent upon the interpretation of the researcher and thus participant statements and subsequent categorization could have been taken out of context. The application and adaptation of the *Ambivalence Model* may have confined the responses to questions based on the three categories within a limited scope, leaving out other variables that may also explain the ethical purchasing gap in this context. Another limitation lies in the profiles of participants. Since most of the interviewees were European and all over the age of 20, they are not representative of the global consumers of fast fashion nor the younger segment (between the ages of 16 – 20) (Hines & Bruce, 2007) of the target market. Also, all interviews were conducted in English, the non-native language of the majority of participants and thus it is possible that some participants were not able to express their opinions as well as they would have otherwise.

Further Research

Further avenues for research may be derived from the themes and neutralization strategies identified. The following include implications for different entities:

For fast fashion retailers who have increasingly begun to offer sustainable lines, further research related to how they may capture the more socially-conscious group of Millennial consumers, considering one of the perceived obstacles to ethical consumption: a lack of information and knowledge regarding sustainable production processes. Further studying the perceptions and attitudes of Millennials within this context may prove valuable for retailers on how to make such information accessible and transparent to these consumers who are unwilling to search for it themselves but perhaps willing to reward such sustainable practices.

Similarly, this theme of a lack of information has several important implications for policymakers and NGOs that may be researched. Considering the stronger pull of fast fashion due to price, style and availability, it may also be of value to identify methods of effective education, targeted toward reinforcing in consumers the values associated with ethical consumption. The identified need for increased visibility and exposure to unethical behavior is also useful for campaign-makers that want to effect change through attention-grabbing media that appeal to consumers' feelings of ethical obligation. Further research may focus on how to increase awareness and consciousness perhaps along the lines of tangible identifiers similar to one participant's suggestion of strengthening the labeling system of clothing that informs consumers of ethical sourcing.

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