Wearing Green: Exploring Motivations behind and Factors Affecting Consumption of Green Fashion Goods

(Full Paper)

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Introduction

With growing concerns over global warming and declining personal health, green fashion has become trendy in the consumer market. Green fashion refers to fashion goods that feature the use of chemically free and environmentally safe and sustainable materials in their production. With this trend, more consumers are turning to fashion goods made of materials such as organic cotton and recycled polyester fibers. To cater to consumer demands, more apparel companies and retailers are starting to focus on this niche market. Well known companies such as Patagonia, Nike and Timberland are pioneers in using recycled plastic and organic materials. Some mainstream brands such as Guess Inc., Joe’s Jean and Seven For All Mankind have all introduced organic cotton merchandise (Tran, 2008). Organic cotton, which accounts for 1 percent of global cotton production (Tucker & Groves, 2008), is becoming more popular. The organic cotton market has increased about 40% annually since 2001 (Casabona, 2010). Sales of linens and clothing made of organic fiber, according to the Organic Trade Association, reached $203 million by 2006, which is up nearly 27 percent from 2005 (Fuentez, 2008). According to Organic Exchange, the global retail sales of organic cotton apparel and home textiles reached an estimate of $4.3 billion in 2009, which increased 35% from 2008 (Casabona, 2010). This figure is expected to reach $5.1 billion in 2010 and $6.0 billion in 2011 (Casabona, 2010).

Green fashion goods can be more expensive than those made from conventional textile materials. For example, organic cotton, which is 20 to 50 percent more expensive than conventional cotton, adds tremendously to the cost of fashion goods (Tran, 2008). With soaring energy prices and slumping house values, consumers have become more cautious about
merchandise prices. So, what will be the future of green fashion? Is it simply a fad or a new consumer trend that will continue? To answer these questions, it is important to understand why consumers choose to purchase and consume green fashion goods. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore motivations behind and factors affecting consumer purchase of green fashion goods. The findings provide insights for companies aiming to target green fashion consumers better.

**Literature review**

Environmental issues have presented opportunities for companies to create competitive advantages (Straughan & Roberts, 1999). It is commonly agreed that being sustainable and socially responsible is sometimes a matter of survival in a competitive business environment. Fashion companies have become more aware of sustainability and have started to apply different strategies in order to be environmentally and socially responsible. The industry first focused on organic and eco-friendly materials (Tucker, 2008). For example, the denim industry uses more organic and recycled cotton, natural dyes and enzymes, and natural resin, as well as recycled buttons (Tran, 2008). With the green movement, the fashion industry has moved beyond using mainly organic fibers and sustainable textile materials to environmental friendly production processes and business practices (Tucker, 2008). Some companies try to be more transparent about their processes to consumers (Feitelberg, 2010). Patagonia, for example, launched “Footprint Chronicles,” a program that allows consumers to track special products’ impact on the environment from design to delivery (Feitelberg, 2010). Being transparent is especially important for young consumers, specifically iGeneration, kids younger than 18 years old, because this generation is more socially and environmentally conscious than other generations (Feitelberg, 2010).
Sustainable Consumption and Green fashion consumers

With increased environmental concerns dating back to the 1980s, more academic research has focused on understanding consumers’ environmental consumption (Straughan & Roberts, 1999). Researchers have investigated many factors affecting consumers’ green consumption behavior. Those factors include both consumer demographic characteristics such as age, gender, income, and psychographic characteristics such as political orientation and altruism (Straughan & Roberts, 1999). For example, Chen (2001) found that traditional cultural value of collectivism and man-nature orientation positively affected Chinese consumers’ attitude towards green purchases. Straughan and Roberts (1999) found that perceived consumer effectiveness and altruism are important to explain ecologically conscious consumer behavior.

The study of green fashion goods consumption has focused mainly on organic cotton consumers. Lin (2009) explored the effects of demographic variables, specifically age, gender, education, ethnicity, and number of children at home and their age, on the consumption of organic cotton goods in Hawaii. The findings suggest that only ethnicity significantly affects the preference of organic cotton goods (Lin, 2009). Gam et al. (2010) found that environmental concerns significantly affect a mother’s willingness to purchase children’s organic cotton clothing. Hustvedt and Dickson (2009) tended to profile organic cotton apparel consumers based on their attitudes, beliefs, and self-identity. They (2009) found that organic cotton apparel consumers had more positive attitudes towards sustainable agriculture, were concerned more about the impact of apparel production on the environment, and preferred to buy local to be socially responsible. However, no study has fully focused on investigating consumption motivations for fashion goods.
Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore consumers’ motivations for purchasing and consuming green fashion goods. It also seeks to understand factors affecting consumers’ green fashion purchasing decisions. A qualitative study with the in-depth interview method was designed to gain insights from consumers’ own perspectives (Ruyter & Scholl, 1998). The qualitative method is especially important for this study because of the lack of literature. Participants were recruited through posters on a major western university campus and word of mouth among green fashion consumers. Thirty green fashion consumers, including 24 females and 6 males, participated in the study. The interview questions focused on understanding participants’ green fashion consumption behavior from a holistic perspective. Participants were asked to share how they started purchasing green fashion goods, why they purchased specific green fashion goods, and if they plan to purchase more similar items and why. The interviews took 15 to 30 minutes each. All the interviews were recorded with permission, and later transcribed into text for data analysis. The themes were developed based on their consumption motivations and factors affecting their green fashion consumption.

Findings

Motivations

Two key motivations surfaced from the interview data, environmental concerns and personal health concerns. The most frequently discussed motivation was environmental concerns, including both natural and social environments. Participants would like to contribute to less chemical waste and greenhouse effects and to preserve our planet for future generations. Using eco-friendly materials makes some participants feel good about themselves.

Joran: “I would like to help out the environment.”
Jeremy: “I figured it [a pair of shoes made of jute] will ultimately end up in a land fill. But it will degrade a lot faster than something that is made completely of rubber and plastic.”

Marilyn: “It fits with my wanting to have a smaller foot print on the Earth and using things wisely and not being destructive. I think that’s the major reason.”

Some participants also expressed their concern the social environment such as welfare of workers. They support organic agriculture and fair trade and prefer to buy local. It is about protecting the “health of the world.”

Lisa: “It is due to my concern about the environment, welfare of workers, ethics, pesticides and chemicals in general.”

Mint: “People should be aware of where things come from and how we process things. We need to pay more if it is sustainable and good for future generations with less waste and more renewable energy.”

Some participants use organic textiles because of personal health. Participants who have sensitive skin believe that clothing and home goods made of organic textiles can alleviate certain symptoms. Some participants have immune system problems and serious allergy issues. So they try to minimize consumption of chemicals, whether it is food, household products or apparel. Meanwhile, a few young moms claimed they preferred baby’s garments that are made of organic textile materials.

Dominque: “People need to know the harm of things that we put on our bodies and in our bodies. So, I decided to look into clothing. I found that when I had a rash it was probably due to my clothing. So I just decided to start looking into wearing organic t-shirts and stuff like that. Slowly but surely I’m trying to change everything to all natural.”

Ellen: “I am always concerned about chemicals, whether that is food or clothing.”

Cheryl: “I had to [go green] because I had an immune system break down and I had tried everything and every kind of doctor and nothing was working. I finally went to an alternative doctor and he told me if I wanted to get well I would have to change everything, all of the products I used in my hair, on my face, on my body, to clean the house, even my bedding my pillows, so I got all organic sheets and pillows.”


**Affecting Factors**

The interview data reveal that product elements that include style, comfort, quality, price and availability affect participants’ consumption of organic fashion goods. Some participants like organic fashion goods for unique designs. They used terms such as “cute,” “stylish,” “fashionable,” “pretty” and “original” to describe some of the items they purchased.

Shavonne: “I love how the shirts feel on my skin, and all of the designs are very cute and original.”

Emily: “I bought an organic cotton t-shirt a couple month ago. Um, honestly I like the design of the shirt. Being made of organic cotton was a bonus.”

Danielle: “I feel the quality of organic materials is usually good. I tend to like the styles, and most importantly I like the lower impact on the environment.”

Some participants bought certain green fashion items because they felt they are very comfortable to wear and touch. A majority of participants claimed the goods made of organic textiles are very soft and feel good next to skin.

Mint: “They are very soft. Sometimes too soft but soft is better than not soft. I would say that overall they are softer. Organic cotton is softer than regular cotton.”

Sonia: “I love clothing made from recycled soda bottles. It feels a little softer and silkier than cotton. And I really like it. There is more and more being made, and people even don’t know that they are wearing it.”

Cameron: “I like them [a pair of pajama shorts and some boxers] a lot. Um… they are really comfortable, especially the pajama shorts. Organic cotton to me seems more breathable.”

The data reveal that participants prefer high quality merchandise. They like goods that can last for a long time. The majority of participants believe that green fashion goods are durable, and they are happy with the items they purchased. A few were concerned about the durability, but they still plan to purchase green textile products because they really care about “saving the planet.”
Cheryl: “(I like) material that holds up and looks like it is well tailored. No puckering, no snagging, and no discoloration.”

Marilyn: “(I want) colors that won’t fade and material that will hold their shape… I am comfortable with green clothing I bought and find comfort that I am doing something to help the earth.”

Ramon: “I like to find things that last a little longer, so I don’t have to buy them as often.”

The data reveal that price is the biggest concern for some participants. They claimed that higher prices of green fashion goods have prevented them from consuming as much as they would like to. Meanwhile, some participants like Sonia believe that it is all right to pay higher prices in order to protect the environment.

Marilyn: “I think that the only reason or factor that is going to affect the growth of the organic textile industry is the expense of making the organic textiles.”

Karen: “We feel good about our investment in the clothing even though we do not buy as much as we would like to because of the prices.”

Ramon: “They are a little bit more expensive. That’s one of the downsides. I understand why they are more expensive, but that’s the biggest concern I have.”

Sonia: “I have heard over and over again that it is more expensive to buy recycled goods. But I think it is pretty comparable to anything else that you are going to buy. It is a personal choice if we want to take care of the environment and not use so many of our natural resources.”

However, price is not a key issue for some participants because some fashion goods made from such materials as hemp and jute can last for a long time. The value provided longevity of goods overcomes higher prices. Also, with more products becoming available in the marketplace, prices tend to go down.

Jeremy: “Prices are important too because nobody wants to spend too much. Like I paid $8 for the shoes I’m wearing. But if I wanted something that was sustainable I would have paid $50 or $60 for a pair of hemp shoes. It pays for itself because it is such a strong material.”
Mint: “I would say in the last 5 years I was able to afford more goods because the market is growing and the price is coming down.”

Finally, the easier access to more choices can also help more participants to learn and consume green fashion goods.

Ellen: Now you can find organic clothing in major stores like Target or Wal-Mart so it is easier to purchase than it was used to be. I buy more because it becomes more available here in the town. It is easier to purchase now.

The data also suggest that besides product elements, formal education and social pressure are two major factors affecting participants’ consumption of green fashion goods. Some participants explained that they became more aware of environmental issues and the impact of conventional textile and apparel on the planet from some college courses. Because of knowledge gained from classes, they become more conscientious when consuming fashion goods. Other participants started to purchase green fashion goods because of the influence of their friends and families. Meanwhile, it seems that some participants were very passionate about educating and introducing green fashion goods to their own family and friends.

Jeremy: “When I was in the sciences I learned that … well I’m just going to exaggerate that glass takes a million years to decompose and plastics take so many thousands of years to decompose. It is just ridiculous to think that long after humans are gone our trash is still going to be here. So it just seems logical to switch to something that is more sustainable and that won’t hurt the planet.”

Alicia: “Well I first heard of green products when I came to college about three years ago. Since then, I started to switch to things that are more environmentally friendly.”

Emily: “When I lived in Santa Cruz, I hung out with people that wore organic cotton clothing. So I was exposed to it and started buying it at some of the local shops.”

**Conclusion and Implications**

Although more academic research has focused on environmental consumption, few studies have examined consumption behavior regarding green fashion goods. With the growth of the environmental movement, more conscientious consumers may choose green textiles and apparel.
This study intended to explore motivations behind consumption of green fashions and to examine factors that affect consumers’ purchase of green fashion goods. The findings reveal that environmental and personal health concerns are two main motivations behind green fashion consumption. However, although health benefits were important for some participants, others mainly focused on the environmental benefits from consuming green fashion goods. Those participants strongly support the philosophy of the green movement and seek to reduce their carbon footprints in order to better maintain the health of the earth as a whole. So, perceived consumer effectiveness and altruism (Straughan & Roberts 1999) may be very important to explain green textile consumption behavior.

The study also reveals that product factors which include style, comfort, quality, price and availability affect consumers’ consumption of green fashion goods. Consumers use textiles and apparel to fulfill a variety of needs. So, both aesthetic and functional features of fashions goods, no matter regular or green ones, are all important for fashion consumers. Some participants were attracted to unique styles and the “soft hand” of green fashion goods. Others value the durability of certain items, especially those made from hemp and jute. However, price appears to be a major concern for many organic consumers. Besides product elements, education and social pressure greatly affect green fashion consumption behavior. The findings reveal that the more consumers know about the effects of the textile and apparel industry on the natural and social environments, the more likely they would choose green fashion goods. Meanwhile, the influence from family and friends is a significant factor in the choice of green fashion goods.

The findings of the study provide some important insights for the fashion industry. First, fashion companies should focus more on product design. Besides basic garments, more attention should be given to fashion apparel and accessories. Style will be more important for less
dedicated green fashion consumers. For many of them, being green is a bonus to being stylish. Meanwhile, different styles also lead to more merchandise variety and choices, which is important for modern consumers. Second, companies should commit to improving product quality. Because many green fashion consumers desire to reduce their carbon footprint, they may focus more on durable and better quality products so that they can consume fewer fashion items. Although many participants are concerned about prices of green textiles and apparel, the value provided by longevity of products may become more important for fashion consumers. So, durability can compensate for the higher prices of green fashion goods. Third, the fashion industry should focus more on consumer education. In-store displays with information on the benefits of consuming green fashion goods – from the product benefits to social and environment benefits – can help consumers make better purchase decisions. More media exposure with celebrity endorsements might be helpful. Overall, it is critical for consumers and fashion companies to understand that green fashion is not all about using organic textile materials, but also sustainable production processes and business practices. With the right strategies and practices, the fashion industry can become greener and meet consumers’ needs and wants better.
References:


