

The perception of sustainability initiatives of a fast fashion company among young adults

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Abstract:

This study seeks to explore how young adults perceive sustainability efforts of a fast fashion company before and after being exposed to a video campaign promoting sustainability. It employs a hybrid methodological technique, consisting of in-depth interviews intertwined with qualitative and quantitative experimental approach. The findings indicate that the majority of the 20 interviewees did not perceive H&M as an environmentally or socially conscious company. After watching the video, most respondents indicated that the campaign had a positive impact on them. Before and after measurement showed a positive increase of the perception of the brand, brand warmth, brand trust and perceived environmental consciousness of the H&M brand.

Keywords: *Sustainable fashion consumption, H&M, young adults*

1. Introduction

The fashion industry, one of the largest industries on earth, employs more than 300 million people worldwide (BoF & McKinsey, 2019) and represents a major economic force and a significant driver of global GDP. Today, fashion companies operate in a very dynamic competitive environment dominated by speed, low prices and responsiveness to customer needs. Since the fashion industry is so late and shows no signs of slowing down, it is important that the industry becomes more sustainable. The fashion industry is believed to be a major contributor to many social and environmental problems, with negative environmental impacts extending throughout the entire life cycle of a piece of clothing (McNeill & Venter, 2019). Consequently, sustainable fashion and eco-friendly fashion have emerged as solutions to these problems. Sustainability is also making a radical change in the fast fashion industry and a revolutionary move to reduce the society's obsession with relentless consumption (Muthu, 2019). Moreover, the fast fashion industry has introduced and adopted innovative solutions to limit the environmental and social impacts of its practices (Pedersen & Andersen, 2015).

Despite these activities, very few empirical studies focus on how sustainability initiatives of fast fashion companies influence consumer preferences and purchasing behavior (De Angelis et al., 2017). To address this gap, our study examines how consumers perceive a fast fashion company's sustainability efforts and how these perceptions influence their engagement with the brand and their attitudes.

2. Theoretical Background

The fashion market has been dominated by a business model that has evolved since the 1980s – the fast fashion trend. Multinational fast fashion companies are competing on low prices and fast turnaround. As a result, they put pressure on margins, on suppliers, externalizing a variety of costs (e.g. labor costs), and devote many resources to advertising. Changing collections every two weeks or so and advertising the “must haves of the season” to stimulate demand forces consumers to buy clothes they do not need. In the last twenty years, spending little to dress well and differently has become the norm for most people, and this is the reason for the success of fast fashion.

The speed of fast fashion and mass production amplifies the problems, as it causes high discharge of hazardous chemicals and toxins in production, an increase in waste, an increase in human rights violations, and greater greenhouse gas emissions. One of the most concerning resources overused by the industry is fresh water. It takes about 3000 liters of water to make a single T-shirt. This is how much we typically drink over a 3-year period (WWF, 2013). The social impact is enormous; employment in the textile sector in underdeveloped countries is often synonymous with low wages, poor working conditions, unsafe working environments, child labor, excessive working hours and slavery conditions. Sustainable issues in production are very complex because the supply chain in the clothing industry is fragmented, complicated and global. Manufacturing processes are less transparent than in food production, e.g., cotton is produced in one country, spun in another, dyed and processed in another and made into a garment in a factory far from the store (GFA & BCG, 2019).

The need to find alternative sustainable and circular sources is a pressing issue. According to the literature, from a consumer behavior perspective, younger generations are paying more and more attention to these issues. Therefore, sustainability has become one of the most important trends in the industry in recent years. This change is forcing the fashion

industry to innovate and find new ways to add value in order to stay both relevant and profitable. Brands have begun to experiment with technological innovations in more sustainable materials, for example, sustainable fibers (pineapple leather, milk protein, recycled coffee grounds). Other fashion companies are offering consumers new alternative ways to spend their money, such as second-hand fashion, or have initiated clothing leasing schemes (e.g. MUD Jeans, Rent The Runway). Other companies focus primarily on producing fashion that is of high quality (long lasting) and timeless design. Patagonia, for example, actively repairs its consumers' clothes or recycles or sells them in its stores (Rattalino, 2018).

The growing attention that consumers, and especially younger generations, are paying to sustainability issues is indeed reflected in the strategies and business models of fashion companies. For example, fast fashion retailer H&M has clearly recognized that consumers, especially Millennials, want to see more sustainable products on the market. Its "Conscious Collection" are made from sustainable materials such as organic cotton, recycled polyester and lyocell (H&M Group, 2021). In 2013, H&M launched a Garment Collecting program that allows customers to drop off their old, unwanted clothes in exchange for a 15% discount voucher that can be used towards an item on their next in-store or online purchase. The company also uses an upcycling process, where some textiles and fabrics are recycled and used to make commercial products. Through this initiative, consumers not only receive a discount when buying products from H&M, but also save natural resources and contribute to a lower environmental impact by avoiding textile waste. In 2018, consumers entered 20,649 tons of old textiles into the program for reuse and recycling (H&M Group, 2021). With their latest initiative Innovation Stories, H&M continues to drive positive change with a pioneering approach that prioritizes innovation, sustainable manufacturing and design. They are introducing new materials such as bio-based yarn derived from castor oil and Desserto, a plant-based alternative to leather made from cactus plants. H&M strives to ensure that no waste from the company ends up in landfills.

Millennials, as the first global generation connected to the Internet and social media, are more influenced by social media in their purchasing decisions than any previous generation. As a result, Millennials have extremely high expectations of the companies from which they choose to purchase products (Talbot, 2012). They are becoming increasingly aware and concerned about natural and man-made disasters around the world (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011), leading to changing shopping habits and expectations for better, more sustainable products and new ways of consuming fashion (Accenture & H&M Foundation Report, 2016). According to a study by Pulse of the fashion industry, 75% of Millennials in the five countries studied consider sustainability extremely or very important (GFA & BCG, 2019). As a result, Millennial consumers want their preferred fashion brands to engage and contribute positively to the market with transparent actions and are willing to pay a premium price for those products that come from sustainable brands. Young adults choose and consume products that help them define who they are, what is important to them and what they value in life (Ordun, 2015), therefore they expect the brands they buy to reflect their own values. This suggests that Millennials have demonstrated their commitment to sustainability within the industry, and therefore it is most likely that this demographic of consumers will drive this new trend.

However, many previous studies have clearly shown that although individuals understand the seriousness of environmental issues, their environmental attitudes do not necessarily lead to sustainable purchasing (Kong et al. 2016). Why the gap? Findings from Joergens (2006), McNeill and More (2015), Kos Koklic et al. (2018) show that the majority of consumers do not appear to consider sustainable and ethical production when choosing clothing because an unethical choice does not directly affect their health and well-being (Joergens, 2006). In other

market sectors, such as food, consumers have taken more steps towards consuming environmentally friendly products because food has a direct impact on a person's health and people can usually feel the results immediately. Additionally, the gap between attitude and behavior is caused by a lack of consumer education in the sustainable fashion market (Gam et al., 2011; Lee & Hill, 2012). According to Hahn-Petersen (2018), product availability and lack of clear marketing seem to be the main problems. Hahn-Petersen (2018) reports that the fashion industry does not provide Millennials with enough sustainable fashion choices that also meet their most important criteria for purchase, namely ease of purchase, price, and value. Furthermore, young adults are now questioning the connection between low fashion prices and unethical working conditions in factories overseas. Furthermore, public trust in brands is currently in crisis. Generation Y consumers pose a major challenge, as traditional marketing methods seem unable to attract and retain them. According to Deloitte's report (2019), more than 25% have zero trust in the media as sources of reliable and accurate information. It is evident that the empowerment of information has led Gen Y consumers to be highly skeptical of both large companies in general and the messages they present (Lee & Hill, 2012). In the last two years, hundreds of thousands of people have used the Internet at Fashion Revolution to discover the hidden supply chain behind clothing. Therefore, green marketing that is not backed up with action will not satisfy today's consumers.

3. Research Methodology

Due to the nature of the research problem, a hybrid methodology was conducted consisting of in-depth interviews intertwined with a qualitative and quantitative experimental approach. In-depth interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method. A qualitative experimental approach provides an opportunity to think about an informant's response through a meaning-constructive process that ultimately better reflects the transition mindset (Robinson & Mendelson, 2012). The experimental approach involved a presentation of the YouTube video of H&M Conscious: Bring It On. The purpose of showing the video was to familiarize respondents with the H&M brand's sustainable project and to analyze how familiarity with the sustainability project affects their willingness to engage with the brand.

In this research, twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with relevant informants. The number of interviews was considered sufficient to achieve saturation and variability (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). First, appointments were made with potential interviewees by telephone. Then, interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype while the questionnaire was answered in writing. The interview topics followed the established interview protocol, i.e. a rough guide was prepared in advance to ensure some standardization across interviews. Data collection began in early February 2020 and ended in late March 2020. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were tape-recorded with participants' consent. The sample consisted of young adults with a range of attitudes towards sustainability.

The in-depth interviews consisted of a qualitative and quantitative before-and-after experiment and included showing an H&M Conscious YouTube campaign: Bring It On. The aim was to familiarize informants with the H&M brand's sustainable project and to explore how this familiarity influenced their willingness to engage with the brand. Finally, the short before and after survey was conducted to further investigate the participants' attitudes.

In the first part, general factors influencing Millennials' purchase intention towards fast fashion products were borrowed from Vuong and Nguyen (2018) and Joergens (2016). To examine participants' sustainable fashion consumption, questions were adapted from McNeil and Moore (2015) and Lee and Hill (2012). In addition, questions about what consumers do

with products when they have outlived their usefulness and how this relates to the purchase of substitute products were adapted from Jacoby et al. (1977).

The second part of the research measured overall perceptions and environmental and social opinions of the H&M brand, adapted from Jitske (2017). Additionally, Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) (Keller, 2001; Jones and Kim (2010)) was measured. Interview content was interpreted and categorized using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

5. Analysis and Results

5.1 Analysis of in-depth interviews

The first part of the empirical investigation focuses on the associations of the informants with relation to the H&M brand. The main words that come to the participants' mind when they hear "H&M" are: Cheap, Basic clothes and Massive. Several interviewees also mentioned Trendy, Sportswear and Kids' clothing and Low Quality. Based on these most common associations, it can be concluded that H&M is not a company that informants would associate with sustainability.

When probed into H&M's environmental consciousness, quite a few interviewees did not recognize H&M as an environmentally conscious company, several were not sure and only a few perceived H&M as an environmentally conscious company. According to the informants' opinion, H&M is not environmentally conscious because use the cheapest materials and produce low quality products with poor manufacturing methods to save costs. Interviewees mostly mentioned that a cheap fast fashion brand could not be sustainable at all, as "sustainable" and "fast fashion" were two contradictory terms. Several participants added that they had to sell better quality clothes and consequently charge higher prices to be perceived as a sustainable brand. Three informants did not recognize that environmental awareness was the focus of the H&M corporation, as its main objective was always profit before sustainability. Although three informants heard about H&M's sustainability efforts (recycling, sustainable collection, organic cotton), they did not believe them as they felt it was more of an ongoing trend and marketing ploy. Several participants stated that they could not decide whether H&M was an environmentally conscious company or not because they did not have sufficient knowledge about it. Interestingly, four informants stated that they perceived H&M as an environmentally conscious company. The main reason was that the majority of multinational enterprises have been following the sustainability trend. Those who perceive H&M as sustainable also mentioned that they knew about the recycling initiative and conscious collection in H&M. Other interviewees mentioned that the company is moving in the right direction, as they had only heard about H&M's sustainability efforts among fast fashion brands.

When asked specifically about H&M's collection boxes for recycling clothes, only three respondents were aware of them. On the other hand, of these three, only one participant brought her clothes to the boxes for recycling at H&M stores. That shows the great marketing potential for H&M to increase consumers' awareness of the brand's recycling project.

Interviewees were also asked whether they perceived H&M as a socially conscious company. Half of the informants were unsure or had no knowledge of whether H&M is a socially conscious brand. Several interviewees answered that they did not recognize H&M as a socially conscious company, while three respondents identified H&M as a socially conscious company. Interviewees mostly mentioned that they did not see a social case as the focus of the company, since their primary focus is to sell as much and as cheap as possible. However, some noticed the label on their clothes "Made in Bangladesh", while two

mentioned that they heard the news about low wages of garment workers in general and child labor scandals, but could not surely say the same for H&M. On the other hand, three interviewees answered that they perceive H&M as socially conscious company. They assume that H&M is conscious about the social aspect as they are a multinational corporation and have to benefit of society at large.

5.2 Qualitative experiment

The next part of the interviews entailed the qualitative experiment. First, the interviewees were shown the YouTube video H&M Conscious: Bring It On, and were asked to share their thoughts about the video. The video raises awareness on the importance of garment recycling. H&M wants to close the loop on fashion by giving consumers an easy solution to hand in their unwanted garments. When asked about the main idea of the campaign, all interviewees showed a high level of understanding of the campaign. All interviewees provided very similar summaries of the project, pointing out that H&M wants to encourage consumers to bring their old, unwanted clothes to their stores, and they will make new garments out of them. Some participants focused more on not disposing the clothes, but rather bringing them to H&M stores. In addition, two female respondents also mentioned that H&M wants to promote diversity in racial, gender and sexual orientation. In general, the video was informative enough for first-time watchers; it was therefore possible to proceed with the experiment.

The campaign conveyed very positive thoughts, as all interviewees perceived the Bring It On project in a positive way. The positive words the participants used most frequently were: *positive, good, opinion, project, amazing, encouraging, idea etc.* The prevailing view was that the campaign was extremely positive as H&M can make new garments out of old ones. Eleven participants have never heard about the recycling project before or some of them had no idea that something like that is even possible. Five informants also pointed out that H&M could increase awareness about the project and advertise it more in order to encourage people to bring their unwanted clothes into the stores. The interviewees saw recycling of old clothes as a fascinating project that demonstrated great action in the right direction, especially as H&M is an influential brand and is powerful and well recognized among consumers.

A few participants added some concerns about the campaign as well. They stated that despite the fact the campaign was really good presented, the H&M uses marketing tricks to be perceived as sustainable. They pointed out that recycling itself is only one piece in the mosaic, meaning that the problem of the fashion industry should start resolving in the overall supply chain and not producing so many clothes. It was mentioned by 2 participants that H&M should show more information and results in the end of the video, in order to achieve trust from people and that the brand definitely has some profit out of the project, for instance free materials from old clothes.

After the showcased video, the interviewees were asked to describe and share their views whether they perceived H&M as an environmentally conscious brand. Majority of interviewees had not been familiar with the H&M's sustainability efforts before seeing the videos, but they mentioned this was the right direction for the fashion industry. Interestingly, 11 respondents perceived H&M as a more sustainable and environmentally conscious brand after they had seen the video. The rest of the interviewees expressed the same opinion towards the sustainability of the brand, while none of the participants mentioned having a negative opinion H&M in terms of sustainability. All of them explained their opinions either as an amazing idea and great project or as a pleasant surprise. Four of them added that the project clearly showed great insights into the recycling process, while two of them mentioned H&M's right intention toward sustainable efforts.

As mentioned, some interviewees still doubt the H&M's environmental efforts, feeling that recycling itself is still not enough for a multinational company, as it is only one tiny part of sustainability in the fashion industry. A few informants indicated that they were doubting the campaign, pointing out the great marketing efforts of the fashion brand aimed at trying to follow the trends and win new consumers. Some participants mentioned that H&M is still a fast fashion brand, selling massive amounts of cheap and low quality clothes and therefore it is not possible to be sustainable at the same time.

The concluding question of the qualitative experiment looked into the impact of the Bring It On campaign on informants. Somewhat surprisingly, 18 respondents stated that the Bring It On campaign had a positive impact on them, while only 2 respondents mentioned that their opinion did not change.

The majority of informants that responded favorably mentioned that the main consequence of the project was that they will start considering to donate more used clothes to the garment collecting boxes into H&M stores. Several pointed out that they will be more aware of and willing to buy the H&M Conscious recycling collection. One interviewee said that he will also recommend donating clothes to H&M to his friends. Some participants with a positive perception of H&M even described the improvement of consumers' overall attitude, as H&M is a multinational well-known brand with powerful impact on the entire industry and the consumers. A few informants mentioned that despite the perceived positive impact, they will not buy clothes from H&M.

On the other hand, 2 people do not perceive any impact of the campaign at all. One of them felt that H&M is not promoting recycling enough to believe them, while the other participant said he would rather donate clothes to Humana, as he supports donating clothes to poor families.

5.3 Quantitative experiment

In addition to the qualitative experiment, the participants were asked to answer a short questionnaire before and after the showcased video. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain deeper insights into what kind of influence knowledge of a company's sustainability practices has on consumer's brand engagement and how the Bring It On campaign changes consumers' attitudes regarding the brand and sustainable fashion.

Using the non-parametric dependent test, we tested whether participants' attitude and intention were significantly different after the H&M Bring It On video campaign. More specifically, it was analyzed whether the emotions, trust, intention to keep buying the brand, perceived environmental consciousness and active brand engagement were likely to be significantly different before and after seeing the video.

Thus, the signed ranks test results in show a positive increase of the perception of the brand in the 3 researched aspects after the experimental video was showcased: brand warmth, brand trust and perceived environmental consciousness of the H&M brand. More specifically, there is a statistically significant difference before and after the showcased video campaign in "H&M gives me a feeling of warmth" sub-category ($Z=-2$, $p<0.05$), "I trust (sustainability claims by) the makers of H&M" ($Z=-3.226$, $p<0.05$), "I am well informed of the makers of H&M" ($Z=-1.998$, $p<0.05$), "I respect H&M" ($Z=-2.517$, $p<0.05$) and also "H&M is an environmentally friendly brand" ($Z=-3.207$, $p<0.05$). This is an indicator that the participants changed their feelings, trust and their environmental consciousness of the company. It is important to mention that sub-dimensions purchase intention or intention to recommend and active brand engagement did not change after the showcased video.

6. Discussion

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the issues of environmental and social sustainability of fashion brands and consumers. The fast fashion industry has been the subject of intense criticism regarding its impact on the environment and human health throughout the supply chain and life cycle of clothing. As a result, sustainable fashion has emerged as a solution to these problems. Although consumer culture is now present across all demographic segments, it is clear that younger consumers are seeking more sustainable products and new ways of consuming fashion (Accenture & H&M Foundation Report, 2016). In response to this trend and the call for research on how sustainability initiatives by fast fashion companies influence consumer preferences and behaviors (De Angelis et al., 2017), this study examines how young adults perceive a fast fashion company's sustainability efforts before and after being exposed to an H&M brand video campaign promoting sustainability. Among fast fashion companies, H&M is a pioneer in integrating sustainability into its business model (H&M Group, 2021).

Due to the broad nature of the topic, the mixed methodology was considered the most appropriate method for collecting key data. It consisted of in-depth interviews intertwined with a qualitative and quantitative experimental approach. The results show that the majority of the 20 respondents did not perceive H&M as an environmentally or socially conscious company. Although the most common associations with H&M prior to the video were “cheap”, “massive” and “basic clothes”, after seeing the video, many saw H&M as a powerful and positive influence. Interviewees were surprised that the multinational company spreads awareness about environmental issues. Before and after measures showed an improvement in brand perception, brand warmth, brand trust, and environmental consciousness of the H&M brand. More specifically, the difference between the “before” and “after” average rankings of the H&M brand’s environmental consciousness was the highest of the analyzed aspects; the average ranking increased from 2 to 3.15. The results show that despite higher ranking after the shown video of sub-dimensions emotions, trust and perceived environmental consciousness, the recommendation intention and active brand engagement have not changed, which clearly shows that garment collecting campaign was not able to reach the “deeper” aspects of active engagement, characterized by intense and active loyalty (Keller et al., 2001). While increasing the consumer knowledge is of importance, it appears that more effort is required to persuade consumers to purchase clothes in H&M stores.

Our findings are subject to certain research limitations, one of which is the research topic. According to Joergens' (2006) argument, it is particularly difficult to study consumer opinions, attitudes and perceptions regarding environmental and social issues because it is a very sensitive research area and informants may respond in a socially desirability manner. To address this social desirability bias, the research topic was explained at the beginning of the interviews and a definition of sustainable fashion was given to participants who were not familiar with the term. The second identified limitation lies in the fact that all interviewees share a common cultural background (grew up in Slovenia), which presents a certain social bias as participants do not come from "all walks of life". Future research should therefore focus on broadening the geographical perspective. In order to define this phenomenon more broadly and to take into account other parts of the population, it will be possible to make some comparisons with samples from other countries.

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