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Fashion Media and Sustainable Fashion Buying Behavior.

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Abstract

Purpose – Using the theory of planned behavior, this paper examined the relationships between different types of media and the intention to buy sustainable apparel and tested whether attitudes, social norms, and self-efficacy beliefs may explain these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional survey study was conducted among 681 young adults (18-26 years old).

Findings – Exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands and social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands predicted respondents' attitudes, descriptive and subjective norms, and self-efficacy beliefs regarding buying sustainable apparel. In turn, attitudes, descriptive norms, and self-efficacy beliefs predicted the intention to buy sustainable apparel. Fashion magazines predicted the intention through self-efficacy. Specialized magazines did not predict the intention to buy sustainable apparel.

Research limitations/implications – Results should be generalized with caution as the current study relied on a convenience sample of young adults. The cross-sectional study design limits the ability to draw conclusions regarding causality. Actual behavior was not addressed and needs to be included in further research.

Practical implications – The present study hints at the importance of social media to affect young consumers' intentions to buy sustainable apparel. Sustainable apparel brands should consider attracting more young social media users to their social media pages.

Originality/value – This study is one of the first to examine the potential of different media to promote sustainable apparel buying intention.

Keywords Social media, Magazines, Theory of planned behavior, Sustainable apparel, Fast fashion

Media and Sustainable Apparel Buying Intention

Introduction

Some sectors of the fashion industry have adopted unethical production processes with negative social (Hobson, 2013; Taplin, 2014) and environmental consequences (Shen, 2014). For example, a quarter of all pesticides in the US are used for cotton production (Luz, 2007). Activists and scholars have called attention for more ethical awareness in the fashion industry (Clark, 2008; Niinimäki and Hassi, 2011; Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik, 2015). Hence, more sustainable clothing options, such as sustainable apparel, have emerged.

Consumers have been hesitant to adopt sustainable apparel because of style and price reasons (Joergens, 2006). Sustainable apparel brands have tried to address this problem by transparent communication about sustainability (Fuentes, 2015). However, consumers still lack knowledge about sustainable apparel brands (Hill and Lee, 2012). As such, research is needed on how the communication about sustainable apparel can be improved.

Little is known about the influence of exposure to different media genres on the popularity of sustainable apparel. Literature on social media influencers (Balakrishnan *et al.*, 2014; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Pihl and Sandström, 2013) and fashion magazines (Steele and Brown, 1995) suggests they play a role in consumers' buying behavior, but empirical evidence showing the importance of media in the consumption of sustainable apparel is lacking. More precisely, we do not know whether social media and magazines have the potential to increase consumers' interest in sustainable apparel.

The current cross-sectional study among young adults aimed to address this gap and explored the role of social media and magazines in the intention to buy ethical apparel produced by sustainable apparel brands. The paper builds on the theory of planned behavior to model the relationships between different types of media genres (i.e., fashion magazines, specialized magazines, social media hosted by sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable

apparel brands and social media hosted by fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands) and the intention to buy ethical apparel and potential mechanisms for explaining these relationships (i.e., attitudes, norms and self-efficacy beliefs). As such, our paper adopts a consumer-driven perspective (Gabrielli *et al.*, 2013), and thus differs from scholars approaching sustainable apparel from an economic perspective (de Brito *et al.*, 2008; Nagurney and Yu, 2012).

Literature review

Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Sustainability overlaps with the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR includes respect for juridical and ethical guidelines, fair treatment of employees and the environment, and preventing harmful side-effects caused by organizational activities (Mohr *et al.*, 2001; Reilly and Hynan, 2014). Sustainable apparel is associated with valuing CSR and producing garment in a socially, ethically and environmentally responsible manner (Joergens, 2006; Niinimäki, 2010). Sustainable apparel is not only produced by companies who perceive sustainability as a defining feature of their clothing (e.g., Patagonia, People Tree, Eileen Fisher). In the past, fast fashion brands (e.g., Zara, H&M, Primark) were known to disregard CSR (Arrigo, 2013) because of their focus on efficient production processes (Cachon and Swinney, 2011; Segre Reinach, 2005). However, recently they have integrated sustainability into their clothing lines.

Many corporations communicate about sustainability, such communication is defined as corporate sustainability communications (CSC) (Signitzer and Prexl, 2007). CSC includes three categories: social aspects, environmental aspects and consumer involvement (Strähle *et al.*, 2015). First, CSC regarding social aspects refers to communicating about satisfying labor conditions for employees (Strähle *et al.*, 2015). Sustainable apparel brands are highly attentive to socially responsible labor conditions. Fast fashion companies have also become more transparent regarding working conditions (Shen, 2014). Because fast fashion companies have

been linked with unsafe workplaces and poor treatment of employees in the past (Adams, 2002; Arrigo, 2013), they have incorporated actions to improve their labor conditions (e.g., the “Sustainability Commitment” code of conduct of H&M which commits suppliers to labor regulations).

Second, CSC regarding environmental aspects refers to communicating about the impact of production practices on the environment (Strähle *et al.*, 2015). Sustainable apparel brands define themselves by environmentally responsible production processes, such as using eco-friendly fibers (Chen and Burns, 2006). Also, companies focusing on fast fashion have introduced sustainable clothing lines (e.g., the “Conscious Collection” of H&M which is produced out of organic cotton).

Third, CSC regarding consumer involvement refers to communicating about mindful consumption and clothing disposal habits (Strähle *et al.*, 2015). Such communication includes information about the usage phase and durability of the clothing, potential use of renewable materials, and garment recycling opportunities (Strähle *et al.*, 2015).

Although the fashion industry has become more attentive to sustainability, most consumers disregard sustainability when buying clothing (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Mohr *et al.*, 2001). While buying unsustainable apparel has environmental and social consequences, it does not directly affect the consumer’s own well-being (Chan and Wong, 2012). As such, consumers are not often willing to bring sacrifices, such as paying a premium price and unfashionable design (Chan and Wong, 2012; Joergens, 2006). Consumers also lack knowledge about sustainable apparel (Hill and Lee, 2012; Ritch and Schröder, 2012). They find it hard to recognize brands that are truly sustainable (McNeill and Moore, 2015). Some consumers even doubt the credibility of CSC because of corporate greenwashing (Lee *et al.*, 2013). Greenwashing refers to companies positioning themselves as ‘green’ although they do not behave in a sustainable manner (Strähle *et al.*, 2015).

As such, it is important to identify sources that are successful in informing (and convincing) consumers about sustainability in fashion. In this view, social media (Reilly and Hynan, 2014; Rocamora, 2012) and magazines (Winge, 2008) may be important media to communicate about sustainable apparel. However, little is known about how exposure to such media content affects individuals' cognitions concerning sustainable apparel.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) may explain the relationships between media use and cognitions regarding sustainable apparel. This theory states that exposure to media messages containing information about a particular behavior (e.g., exposure to social media and magazine content on buying sustainable apparel) influences a set of cognitions that explain individuals' intention to engage in that behavior (e.g., intention to buy sustainable apparel). This intention subsequently predicts individuals' likelihood to enact that behavior (e.g., buying sustainable apparel).

The set of cognitions includes attitudes, norms and self-efficacy beliefs. *Attitudes* toward buying sustainable apparel refer to the extent to which a consumer holds favorable outcome beliefs regarding buying sustainable apparel (Ajzen, 1991). *Norms* include subjective and descriptive norms (Connell and Kozar, 2012). Subjective norms regarding sustainable apparel can be understood as the pressure from the social environment (e.g., family, friends, or colleagues) to buy sustainable apparel and the motivation to comply with this pressure (Ajzen, 1991; Connell and Kozar, 2012). Descriptive norms regarding sustainable apparel refer to the extent to which individuals believe that their social environment buys sustainable apparel (Connell and Kozar, 2012). Although the theory of planned behavior only includes subjective norms, literature (Connell and Kozar, 2012) has highlighted the importance of descriptive norms in shaping one's intentions. Finally, *self-efficacy beliefs* about sustainable apparel can

be described as the extent to which individuals think they are able to buy sustainable apparel when they aim to buy such clothing (Ajzen, 1991).

The theory of planned behavior predicts that (1) cognitions affect behavioral intentions and subsequent behavior and (2) these cognitions are affected by media exposure. Regarding the first assumption, studies using the theory of planned behavior have confirmed the importance of attitudes and norms in explaining sustainable apparel buying intention. A survey study of Kang, Liu and Kim (2013) indicated that attitudes (i.e., believing that purchasing behavior could affect the environment) and subjective norms (i.e., believing that their social environment valued ethical consumption) positively predicted male and female college students' (18 to 29 years old) intention to purchase sustainable apparel. The survey study of Cowan and Kinley (2014) among men and women (18 years and older) found that attitudes (i.e., environmental concerns) and subjective norms to act green positively predicted individual's intention to purchase ethical fashion. Self-efficacy beliefs appeared to be non-significant in both studies.

Regarding the second assumption, little research has included media use when studying ethical fashion behavior. Studies examining other types of behavior (e.g., Beullens and Vandebosch, 2016; Martino *et al.*, 2005) have shown that media are an important socialization agent. Media have the ability to predict young individuals' cognitions toward certain behaviors. Potentially, media use may also shape cognitions about sustainable apparel behavior. Four media genres may be important to consider regarding sustainable apparel: (1) fashion magazines, (2) specialized magazines, (3) social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands, and (4) social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands. Studies examining other types of behavior (e.g., Beullens and Vandebosch, 2016; Martino *et al.*, 2005) have suggested that the generated media-effect (i.e.,

on cognitions and intention) depends on the type of media (e.g., social media or magazines) and the media message (e.g., content of CSC).

Regarding the type of media, previous research has suggested that the richness of the medium may affect the attitudes toward the communicated CSR initiatives (Saat and Selamat, 2014). Social media are considered to be more rich media than magazines because of their interactive features. These features enable various communication actions between producers of media content and users of media content. The interactive nature of social media increases its potential to truly engage users in a ‘community’ (Reilly and Hynan, 2014). Social media are also considered to be more transparent as they allow a direct dialogue with the stakeholders (Lee *et al.*, 2009). When brands post information on social media, stakeholders are invited to comment on the posts and thus to directly discuss the sustainability initiatives. As such, social media can be more influential in affecting consumers’ attitudes as compared to traditional media, such as magazines.

Regarding the media content, media genres are likely to differ in their coverage of information on sustainability in fashion. Fashion magazines are focused on the trendiness of fashion (Gough-Yates, 2003). Fashion magazines have also been noted to report about sustainability in the fashion industry (e.g., The Green Issue of Vanity Fair, Winge, 2008). Such articles include stories about eco-conscious celebrities (Winge, 2008), information about the eco-friendliness of brands (Hoff, 2014a) and sustainability initiatives from fast fashion brands (e.g., Elle discussed H&M’s ‘Conscious Denim Collection’, Hoff, 2014a).

Another potential information source about sustainable apparel may be specialized magazines, like National Geographic or The Ecologist (Beard, 2008). Such specialized magazines cover articles about the environment and ethical trade. As such, specialized magazines may be expected to support sustainable apparel buying behavior.

MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

Research has shown that companies in general (Reilly and Hynan, 2014), but also sustainable apparel brands (Fuentes, 2015), use social media to inform about CSR activities. Also, eco-activists, such as Livia Firth, and sustainable organizations, such as eco-age, inform consumers about sustainability in fashion on social media. Therefore, social media hosted by sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands, can be expected to provide a rich platform to discuss the ethical component of fashion (Shen *et al.*, 2014) and promote sustainable apparel extensively.

In addition, social media hosted by fast fashion brands and fashion bloggers have a similar focus as fashion magazines: They mainly inform consumers about the trendiness of clothing. Giving the increased sustainability interest of companies producing fast fashion, they may also post about the (sporadic) CSR activities fast fashion companies are involved in. Such messages can be expected to occur rather seldom, though. Research comparing companies with a true sustainability focus versus companies with sporadic sustainability activities (e.g., fast fashion companies) warns that the amount of social media messages regarding sustainability is higher among true green companies (Reilly and Hynan, 2014).

Overall, research suggests different media types cover to a different extent information about sustainable apparel. These media differences may result in different effects on cognitions and intention to buy sustainable apparel. Guided by the theory of planned behavior, we aim to further examine this:

Research Question: Are there differences in the relationships of exposure to 1) fashion magazines, 2) specialized magazines, 3) social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands 4) social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands with the intention to buy sustainable apparel and the attitudes, subjective and descriptive norms and self-efficacy beliefs on buying sustainable apparel?

Control Variables

Fashion consciousness, involvement in sustainable organizations and gender will be included as control variables. Fashion consciousness has shown to affect one's lifestyle and buying behavior (O'Connor *et al.*, 1997). Fashion conscious consumers can be expected to consume more fashion media and to have well-developed opinions regarding fashion. Also, prior involvement in sustainable organizations may be linked to more favorable cognitions about sustainable apparel as they promote this clothing style (Vuruskan and Fröhlich, 2012). Lastly, women are more interested in fashion than men (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009). As such, women may consider to buy sustainable apparel more often than men. A graphical presentation of the variables in the theory of planned behavior and the control variables is displayed in figure 1.

[FIGURE 1: ABOUT HERE]

Method

Data Collection and Sample

As young consumers are more concerned with fashion (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009) and more willing to buy sustainable products (Hill and Lee, 2012; Jin Ma *et al.*, 2012), this study focuses on young adults. Data were collected among a convenience sample of 681 [identifying data deleted] adults aged between 18 to 26 years. The mean age was 22 years ($SD = 1.97$). The sample included more women (84.6%) than men (15.4%). An online standardized questionnaire was created using Qualtrics software. The questionnaire was subjected to a pilot study of 8 respondents. As a result, the wording of several questions was adapted. Confidentiality was assured and informed consent was requested by the start of the questionnaire. Respondents with incomplete data or unsigned informed consents were not included in the sample. Contact details of the researchers were added in case of comments or problems. The questionnaire was distributed mainly through the communication facilities of the University of the researchers [identifying data deleted] and on social media like Facebook and Instagram. To encourage

participation, respondents' email addresses were entered in a lottery to win an incentive (reward cards of €30).

Measures

Attitudes on sustainable apparel. An adapted version of the bipolar scale for attitudes of Fishbein *et al.* (2003) was used. Respondents evaluated whether “buying sustainable apparel is”: (a) *bad/good*, (b) *unpleasant/pleasant*, (c) *unwise/wise*, (d) *difficult/easy*, (e) *unnecessary/necessary* and (f) *uncomfortable/comfortable*. Principal components analysis indicated that all items, except “difficult/easy”, loaded on one factor with a loading higher than .40 (eigenvalue: 2.58, explained variance: 43.03%). Reliability analysis showed α would increase from .69 to .76 when this item would be removed. Therefore, the item “difficult/easy” was not included in the final variable that summed the scores of the five other items. Higher scores on this variable indicate a more positive attitude toward buying sustainable apparel.

Subjective norms on sustainable apparel. Subjective norms were measured using an adapted version of two items of Fishbein *et al.* (2003): “*Most people who are important to me believe I should buy sustainable apparel*” and “*Most people who are important to me have a positive attitude toward sustainable apparel*” ($r = .49, p < .001$). Answer categories ranged from (1) “*totally disagree*” to (7) “*totally agree*.” A sum variable of the scores on these two items was created. Higher scores indicate more positive subjective norms.

Descriptive norms on sustainable apparel. Respondents evaluated whether they agreed that “*Most people who are important to them buy sustainable apparel*.” Answer categories ranged from (1) “*totally disagree*” to (7) “*totally agree*”. Higher scores indicate more positive descriptive norms.

Self-efficacy beliefs on sustainable apparel. An adapted version of the self-efficacy scale of Fishbein *et al.* (2003) was used: “*How certain are you that you can buy sustainable*

apparel?”. Answer categories ranged from (1) “*very certain I cannot*” to (7) “*very certain I can.*” Higher scores indicate more confidence in one’s ability to buy sustainable apparel.

Behavioral intention to buy sustainable apparel in the future. The question “*How likely is it that in the future, you will buy sustainable apparel?*” (Fishbein *et al.*, 2003) was included. Responses ranged from (1) “*very unlikely*” to (7) “*very likely.*” Higher scores indicate a higher intention to buy sustainable apparel. For descriptive purposes, we created an additional variable that divided respondents into “high intenders” (score 6 or 7) and “low intenders” (score 5 or lower).

Exposure to fashion magazines. Respondents indicated how often they read fashion magazines, such as Elle, Vogue, and GQ. Answer categories ranged from (1) “*almost never*” to (7) “*almost always.*” Higher scores indicate higher exposure to magazine content regarding fashion.

Exposure to specialized magazines. Respondents indicated how often they read magazines, such as National Geographic, GPM, and Animal Times. Answer categories ranged from (1) “*almost never*” to (7) “*almost always.*” Higher scores indicate higher levels of exposure to magazine content regarding ethical and environmental issues.

Exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands. A three item-scale was developed ($\alpha = .70$). Respondents indicated how often they consulted “*sustainable organizations like PETA, Unicef, Fair Wear Foundation on Facebook, Instagram or other social media*”, “*blogs about sustainability or activists/celebrities like Livia Firth who promote sustainability*” and “*sustainable apparel brands such as Filippa K, JBC and Jack Wolfskin on Facebook, Instagram or other social media.*” Answer categories ranged from (1) “*almost never*” to (7) “*almost always.*” The items of the scale were summed. Higher scores indicate higher levels of exposure to sustainable apparel information on social media.

Exposure to social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands.

Respondents indicated how often they consulted “*fashion blogs such as Ghent Streetstyle, Polienne, Fashionata en Dogs & Dresses*” and “*fast fashion brands such as Zara, H&M, and Primark on Facebook, Instagram or other social media*” ($r = .46, p < .001$). Answer categories ranged from (1) “*almost never*” to (7) “*almost always*.” The items of the scale were summed. Higher scores indicate higher levels of exposure to fast fashion information on social media.

Control variables. Fashion consciousness was measured using an adapted version of the fashion awareness scale of Tigert, Ring en King (1976). Four statements, such as “*I am interested in fashion*” and “*I keep up-to-date on the latest fashion trends*”, were evaluated by respondents. Answer categories ranged from (1) “*not agree at all*” to (7) “*totally agree*.” A principal components analysis (eigenvalue: 3.20; explained variance: 79.90%) yielded one factor with good internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$). The items of the scale were summed. Higher scores on this measure are an indication of increased fashion consciousness.

Knowledge of sustainable organizations was measured by asking respondents whether they were familiar with eight selected organizations, such as the Fair Wear Foundation or Schone Kleren Campagne (0 = *not familiar with the organization*, 1 = *familiar with the organization*). Items were summed into one variable. Higher scores indicate more knowledge of sustainable organizations.

Lastly, gender was assessed (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*).

Analyses

Data were checked for missing values, outliers, normality distribution (skewness < 3 , kurtosis < 10), and linearity assumption. As described above, principal components analyses were conducted to validate the proposed factor structure of scales (Janssens *et al.*, 2008). Next, descriptive analyses and correlation analyses were calculated. Conditional process analysis,

using Hayes's OLS regression based tool PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), tested the research question (see figure 1). Exposure to the two types of social media content, specialized magazines and fashion magazines (X) were entered as predictors. Respondents' intention to buy sustainable apparel in the future was entered as the dependent variable (Y), while attitudes, subjective norms, descriptive norms and self-efficacy beliefs were included as mediating variables operating in parallel (M). Fashion consciousness, knowledge of sustainable organizations and gender were entered as control variables.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics. Respondents were irregularly exposed to social media content of environmental organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 3.40$), social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 3.18$), specialized magazines ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.48$) and fashion magazines ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.73$). On average, they showed highly positive attitudes toward sustainable apparel ($M = 25.71$, $SD = 4.22$) and indicated they would buy sustainable apparel in the future ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.62$). However, this intention was not so strong as illustrated by the distribution of high- and low intenders. A total of 74.7% of the respondents were low intenders, while 25.3% could be considered as high intenders. Respondents indicated that they thought that their social environment rarely bought sustainable apparel ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.14$) and did not believe that their social environment favored buying sustainable apparel ($M = 7.32$, $SD = 2.34$). Respondents also expressed feelings of uncertainty regarding their own capacities to buy sustainable apparel ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.52$). Lastly, respondents indicated on average to consider themselves as fashion conscious ($M = 16.84$, $SD = 6.01$) and had an average knowledge of sustainable organizations ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.20$).

[TABLE 1: ABOUT HERE]

Correlation Analyses

Correlations between all variables of interest were calculated and are shown in Table 2. These correlations support significant relationships among exposure to social media content of environmental organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands and attitudes, subjective and descriptive norms, self-efficacy beliefs and intention ($p < .001$). Exposure to social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands correlated significantly with descriptive norms ($p < .05$) and self-efficacy beliefs ($p < .001$), but not with the other cognitions. Exposure to specialized magazines correlated significantly with subjective norms ($p < .001$), descriptive norms ($p < .01$) and intention ($p < .01$), but not with attitudes. Lastly, null findings were found between exposure to fashion magazines and the cognitions under scrutiny.

[TABLE 2: ABOUT HERE]

Conditional Process Model

A conditional process model (see Figure 1) estimating whether attitudes (M1), subjective norms (M2), descriptive norms (M3) and self-efficacy beliefs (M4) mediated the relationships between exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands (X1), social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands (X2), specialized magazines (X3), fashion magazines (X4) and the intention to buy sustainable apparel in the future (Y) was tested.

[TABLE 3: ABOUT HERE]

Table 3 gives an overview of the results of this analysis. Data indicated that exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands was a significant positive direct predictor of attitudes ($\beta = .27$, $LLCI/ULCI = .16/.38$), subjective norms ($\beta = .21$, $LLCI/ULCI = .15/.27$), descriptive norms ($\beta = .07$, $LLCI/ULCI = .04/.10$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .13$, $LLCI/ULCI = .09/.17$). Specialized magazines were not significantly related to any of the cognitions.

MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

Exposure to social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands was a significant negative direct predictor of attitudes ($\beta = -.22$, $LLCI/ULCI = -.37/-.08$), subjective norms ($\beta = -.17$, $LLCI/ULCI = -.25/-.10$), descriptive norms ($\beta = -.06$, $LLCI/ULCI = -.10/-.02$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = -.13$, $LLCI/ULCI = -.18/-.08$). Fashion magazines positively predicted self-efficacy ($\beta = .14$, $LLCI/ULCI = .05/.23$), but not attitudes or norms.

In addition, attitudes, norms, and self-efficacy were tested as direct predictors of the intention to buy sustainable apparel. Results indicated that attitudes ($\beta = .05$, $LLCI/ULCI = .02/.07$), descriptive norms ($\beta = .24$, $LLCI/ULCI = .13/.35$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .16$, $LLCI/ULCI = .08/.24$) were found to significantly positively predict the intention. Subjective norms did not significantly predict the intention. Moreover, social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands also had a direct relationship ($\beta = .09$, $LLCI/ULCI = .05/.13$) with the intention to buy sustainable apparel. No other direct relationships between media use and intention were found.

The significance of indirect relationships was further examined. The total indirect effect of exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and brands sustainable apparel brands on intention was .06 ($LLCI/ULCI = .04/.08$). The indirect effect of exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands on intention through the cognitions was .01 ($LLCI/ULCI = .00/.02$) for attitudes, .02 ($LLCI/ULCI = .01/.03$) for descriptive norms, and .02 ($LLCI/ULCI = .01/.04$) for self-efficacy beliefs.

The total indirect effect of exposure to social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands on intention was -.05 ($LLCI/ULCI = -.08/-.03$). The indirect effect of social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands on intention through the cognitions was -.01 ($LLCI/ULCI = -.03/.00$) for attitudes, -.01 ($LLCI/ULCI = -.03/.00$) for descriptive norms and -.02 ($LLCI/ULCI = -.04/-.01$) for self-efficacy beliefs.

In sum, exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands and exposure to social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands were respectively positively and negatively related to the intention to buy sustainable apparel through attitudes, descriptive norms and self-efficacy. Subjective norms had no mediating value. The relationship between exposure to fashion magazines and intentions to buy sustainable apparel was mediated by self-efficacy, but not by the other cognitions.

Discussion

Little is known about the role of different media genres in individuals' cognitions about sustainable apparel. The current study addressed this gap by using the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and found that exposure to social media has the potential to shape young adults' attitudes, norms and self-efficacy beliefs regarding sustainable apparel. Social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands encouraged the adoption of positive attitudes, subjective norms, descriptive norms and self-efficacy beliefs regarding sustainable apparel. In contrast, social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands discouraged the adoption of such positive cognitions. Fashion magazines played a positive role in young adults' self-efficacy beliefs. Fashion magazines enhanced readers' beliefs about their abilities to purchase sustainable apparel. Specialized magazines did not predict the cognitions about sustainable apparel. It is possible that this media genre focuses on sustainability in general but does not cover enough information about sustainability in fashion to have an impact on cognitions regarding sustainable apparel.

In line with the propositions of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and prior literature on risk behavior (Beullens and Vandenbosch, 2016; Martino *et al.*, 2005) we also found that the relationships between social media use and the intention to buy sustainable apparel were mediated through three cognitive processes.

MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

First, attitudes mediated the relationships between social media use and the intention to buy sustainable apparel. Social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands related to an increased number of perceived positive outcomes of buying ethical fashion. Subsequently, these positive attitudes were associated with a higher intention to buy sustainable apparel. Social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands was linked to a decrease in perceived positive outcomes of buying ethical fashion. In turn, these negative attitudes negatively predicted the intention to buy sustainable apparel.

Second, descriptive norm perceptions mediated the relationships between social media use and the intention to buy sustainable apparel. The more young adults consumed social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable apparel brands, the more they believed close relatives bought sustainable apparel. In turn, these descriptive norm perceptions positively predicted their buying intentions. When looking at social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands, we found that the more young adults were exposed to such media content, the less they believed close relatives bought sustainable apparel. These descriptive norms negatively predicted their buying intentions.

In contrast to previous research (Cowan and Kinley, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2013), subjective norms did not predict the intention to buy sustainable apparel. Potentially, subjective norms cannot be learned from social media channels hosted by fashion bloggers, activists or organizations in the fashion industry. Future research may examine whether messages that are posted by close relatives on social media about fashion may exert an influence on subjective norms, though.

Third, self-efficacy beliefs mediated the relationships between social media use and intention to buy sustainable apparel. Social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands related to increased feelings of uncertainty regarding one's ability to buy sustainable apparel, while social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists and sustainable

apparel brands correlated with a boost in one's self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn predicted the intention.

Self-efficacy beliefs also positively mediated the relationship between fashion magazines and the intention to buy sustainable apparel. Future research may investigate whether this relationship can be explained by the provision of positive role models wearing eco-friendly clothing (Winge, 2008) and the provision of information on the eco-friendliness of different brands (Hoff, 2014a).

Limitations

As with all studies, the present study has a number of shortcomings. First, the study relied on a convenience sample of young [identifying information deleted] adults. Therefore, results should be generalized with caution. For instance, research has revealed that respondents belonging to the babyboom and swing generation are more focused on the quality of clothing, less interested in fashionable design and highly value fair trade clothing. Potentially, an older age group would respond differently to messages about sustainable apparel. Also, our sample included more women than men. This is not surprising as existing research shows that fashion is especially an interest of young women (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009).

Second, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to draw conclusions regarding causality. Media effect theories (e.g., reinforcing spirals theory, Slater, 2007) highlight the potential of cognitions to influence the selection of media content and vice versa. Such dynamic processes between media use and cognitions about sustainable apparel can be captured in longitudinal research. Future experimental research may further examine the causal order of such relations.

Third, in line with prior research on consumption behavior (Cowan and Kinley, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2013), we focused on the relationships between media and the intention to buy sustainable apparel. Although many studies have demonstrated that intention is a strong

predictor of actual behavior (George, 2004; Pelling and White, 2009), we did not address links with actual buying behavior. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether respondents will actually buy sustainable apparel in the future. Future research may examine this issue with attention to potential barriers for acting upon one's intention. Particular barriers for sustainable apparel may be the consumers' lack of knowledge about sustainable apparel brands, premium price and unfashionable design (Joergens, 2006).

Implications

Sustainable apparel brands should be aware of the potential that social media offer to promote sustainable buying behavior. The present study indicates that exposure to social media content about sustainable apparel is a direct and indirect predictor of intentions to buy sustainable apparel. However, our results also showed that young consumers are rarely exposed to such media. As such, ethical fashion companies are encouraged to develop a strategy to attract more young social media users as followers of their social media pages. The popularity of social media pages promoting sustainable apparel can be enhanced by posting more vivid (e.g. videos) and interactive (e.g. contests) posts (de Vries *et al.*, 2012) and the provision of promotional incentives (Muk, 2013).

Our results further indicated that social media posts of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands are advised to contain messages that are likely to affect consumers' attitudes toward sustainable apparel, descriptive norm perceptions and self-efficacy beliefs as these cognitions were found to predict buying intention. Ethical fashion companies should, therefore, consider producing posts that are targeted at increasing such cognitions. For instance, to enhance self-efficacy, social media posts of sustainable organizations and eco-activists should consider focusing on information about which fashion brands are sustainable. Such information is important as consumers indicate to lack knowledge about the names of sustainable apparel brands (McNeill and Moore, 2015).

Also, this research found that fashion magazines positively predicted self-efficacy beliefs. Although fashion magazines are mainly concerned with the trendiness of fashion (Gough-Yates, 2003), their coverage of news about sustainability in the fashion industry is effective. Brands should, therefore, consider to send out press releases on their sustainability initiatives.

Finally, our results showed that social media of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands negatively predicted cognitions regarding sustainable apparel. Fashion bloggers enjoy a high credibility among young followers (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Pihl and Sandström, 2013). As such, sustainable apparel brands could consider enhancing their popularity by reaching out to fashion influencers (Muk, 2013). Also, fast fashion brands may consider communicating more about their sustainability initiatives. Such communication seems to be needed to encourage consumers to buy sustainable apparel collections produced by fast fashion companies.

In sum, the current study is one of the first to demonstrate the role of media in young consumers' intention to buy sustainable apparel. The results highlight the importance of social media to motivate individuals to invest in sustainable apparel.

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MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Exposure to social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands	2.00	14.00	5.85	3.40
Exposure to social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands	3.00	21.00	5.08	3.18
Exposure to specialized magazines	1.00	7.00	2.25	1.48
Exposure to fashion magazines	1.00	7.00	2.68	1.73
Attitudes on sustainable apparel	5.00	35.00	25.71	4.22
Subjective norms on sustainable apparel	2.00	14.00	7.32	2.34
Descriptive norms on sustainable apparel	1.00	7.00	2.86	1.14
Self-efficacy beliefs on sustainable apparel	1.00	7.00	3.87	1.52
Intention to buy sustainable apparel	1.00	7.00	4.22	1.62
Fashion consciousness	4.00	28.00	16.84	6.01
Knowledge of sustainable organizations	0.00	8.00	3.60	1.20

MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

Table 2

Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands	1										
2. Social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands	.42***	1									
3. Specialized magazines	.39***	.15***	1								
4. Fashion magazines	.37***	.61***	.23***	1							
5. Attitudes	.17***	.01	.01	.06	1						
6. Subjective norms	.26***	-.07	.17***	.00	.21***	1					
7. Descriptive norms	.15***	-.08*	.12**	.00	.05	.40***	1				
8. Self-efficacy beliefs	.16***	-.16***	.07	-.01	.10*	.22***	.26***	1			
9. Intention	.26***	-.04	.12**	.06	.20***	.26***	.27***	.27***	1		
10. Fashion consciousness	.35***	.66***	.11**	.61***	.07	.01	-.06	-.14***	-.00	1	
11. Knowledge of sustainable organizations	.21***	.02	.13***	.10*	.11**	.13**	.06	.06	.15***	.09*	1

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

Table 3

Conditional process model (mediation) examining the conditional indirect relations between exposure to media content with young adults' intention to buy sustainable apparel

	Attitudes		Subjective norms		Descriptive norms		Self-efficacy		Intention	
	Coeff	LLCI/ULCI	Coeff	LLCI/ULCI	Coeff	LLCI/ULCI	Coeff	LLCI/ULCI	Coeff	LLCI/ULCI
Constant	23.34*	21.97/24.72	6.08*	5.34/6.82	2.98*	2.61/3.35	4.28*	3.80/4.76	.61	-.27/1.50
Social media content of sustainable organizations, eco-activists, and sustainable apparel brands	.27*	.16/.38	.21*	.15/.27	.07*	.04/.10	.13*	.09/.17	.09*	.05/.13
Social media content of fashion bloggers and fast fashion brands	-.22*	-.37/-.08	-.17*	-.25/-.10	-.06*	-.10/-.02	-.13*	-.18/-.08	-.04	-.10/.01
Specialized magazines	-.21	-.44/.03	.11	-.01/.24	.03	-.03/.10	-.03	-.11/.05	.01	-.08/.09
Fashion magazines	.08	-.17/.33	-.03	-.17/.10	.05	-.02/.12	.14*	.05/.23	.03	-.06/.12
Fashion consciousness	.04	-.03/.12	.03	-.01/.07	-.00	-.02/.02	-.03*	-.06/.00	-.01	-.04/.01
Knowledge of sustainable organizations	.23	-.04/.50	.11	-.03/.26	.02	-.06/.09	.02	-.07/.11	.09	-.01/.18
Gender	.75	-.19/1.70	-.17	-.68/.33	-.49*	-.75/-.24	-.43*	-.76/-.10	.31	-.03/.65
Attitudes									.05*	.02/.07
Subjective norms									.05	-.01/.10
Descriptive norms									.24*	.13/.35
Self-efficacy									.16*	.08/.24
Model summary	$R = .24, R^2 = .06$		$R = .34, R^2 = .12$		$R = .27, R^2 = .07$		$R = .34, R^2 = .11$		$R = .44, R^2 = .19$	
	$F(5,909), p < .001$		$F(12,975), p < .001$		$F(7,513), p < .001$		$F(12,402), p < .001$		$F(14,720), p < .001$	

Note: * $p < .05$, LLCI = Lower Level Confidence Interval, ULCI = Upper Level Confidence Interval

MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABLE APPAREL

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram based on the theory of planned behavior for the relationships between the exposure to media content, cognitions toward sustainable apparel, and the behavioral intention to buy sustainable apparel in the future.

Note: The media variables and control variables were tested separately in relation to the different cognitions. They were visualized into one box to maintain a clear overview of the model.