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Staging luxury experiences for understanding sustainable fashion consumption: A balance theory application

Jinghe Han ^c, Yuri Seo ^b, Eunju Ko ^{a,*}

^a Fashion Marketing, Department of Clothing & Textiles, Yonsei University, 50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120749, Republic of Korea

^b Department of Marketing, Business School, The University of Auckland, Owen G. Glenn Building, 12 Grafton Road, Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

^c Department of Clothing & Textiles, Yonsei University, 50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, sustainable fashion products consumption (SFPC) receives attention from both academic scholars and practitioners. While fashion consumers profess concerns about sustainability issues, the extant literature demonstrates a gap between such concerns and actual consumption decisions and behaviors. This study illustrates how marketers can encourage contemporary consumers to become strongly oriented toward sustainable fashion product consumption (SFPC). Heider's balance theory and consumer luxury brand experiences explain and reveal how a state of psychological imbalance causes the attitude–behavior gap between sustainable fashion and SFPC behaviors. This report includes new propositions explaining SFPC that receive support via focus group interviews and direct observations and post-behavior interviews of staged shopping trips—each participant was given money (approx. USD \$180) to spend in the two eco-fashion stores. Developing and staging memorable consumer-centered experiences that orient consumers toward SFPC encourages the consumers achieving desired balance states.

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1. Introduction

For decades, fashion companies have been criticized for unsustainable conduct that negatively impacts environmental quality and human well-being by producing high levels of carbon emissions, poor labor conditions, excessive waste, and chemical usage (Luz, 2007). To address these concerns, some fashion companies are developing sustainable products and business practices (Jang, Ko, Chun, & Lee, 2012), a *sustainable* or *eco-fashion* movement (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011). Sustainable fashion lacks a single definition; however, the concept broadly refers to a range of corporate undertakings to “correct a variety of perceived wrongs in the fashion industry including animal cruelty, environmental damage, and worker exploitation” (Lundblad & Davies, 2015, p. 149).

Sustainable fashion's major challenge remains that “fashion customers are hungry for goods...Low prices, good design, good quality fashion clothing items, coupled with an exciting shopping leisure experience on the cheap, mean an increase in purchases, which is difficult to reconcile with the idea of looming environmental Armageddon” (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011, p.21). Although fashion consumers profess sustainability concerns, their actual consumption behaviors poorly reflect

such responsibility (Chan & Wong, 2012; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Consequently, this study offers a novel perspective to show how marketers might educate contemporary consumers to become more strongly oriented toward sustainable fashion products consumption (SFPC).

Specifically, informed by recent applications of Heider's balance theory (e.g., Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009; Martin & Woodside, 2011) and luxury brand experiences in marketing (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1998), a participatory action investigation (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008) investigates young fashion consumers in South Korea regarding their SFPC attitudes and practices. Results support the proposition that consumers are in constant state of psychological imbalance, an attitude–behavior gap, between their sustainability concerns and their own SFPC. Developing and staging memorable consumer-centered experiences allows marketers to encourage more positive SFPC orientations and help achieve a balanced state (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

This study makes three major contributions relevant to sustainable fashion products. First, this study applies Heider's (1958) balance theory to explain the gap between consumers' ethical attitudes and purchasing behaviors. Second, the results help to develop a novel perspective to reduce the imbalance by staging memorable experiences. Third, this study reports an emic (i.e., first-person) perspective on how fashion consumers may interpret the staged fashion experiences and how they experience immediate and long-term impacts on their SFPC engagement.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: hbetman@naver.com (J. Han), y.seo@auckland.ac.nz (Y. Seo), ejko@yonsei.ac.kr (E. Ko).

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Sustainable fashion paradox

Increasingly, academics and practitioners are turning attention to ethics, environmental concerns, and sustainability issues relating to affordable, trend-sensitive, and fast-fashion (Chan & Wong, 2012; Joy et al., 2012; Sun, Kim, & Kim, 2014). They strive to determine how fashion consumers form evaluative judgments and make purchasing decisions about products positioned as eco-friendly or sustainable. On one hand, strong evidence suggests a growing consumer concern about sustainability issues (Kim et al., 2015; Maloney et al., 2014). For instance, a 2014 Nielsen survey of 30,000 people in 60 countries reveals that 55% are “willing to pay more for products and services provided from companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact” (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Further, evidence suggests growing consumer awareness that “individual consumption fosters organizational production, creating an ongoing cycle of appetite, simultaneously voracious and insatiable” (Joy et al., 2012, p. 277). Recognizing these trends, the sustainable fashion industry seeks to convert fashion consumers' positive environmental concerns into actual purchases.

Recent reports indicate that consumers appear reluctant to adopt sustainable fashion. Many consumers demonstrate inconsistent pro-sustainability attitudes and SFPC behaviors. McKinsey and Company's 2014 global fashion market study finds that fashion consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious, but surprisingly few of these consumers are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products (Keller, Magnus, Saskia, Nava, & Tochtermann, 2014). Thus consumers sometimes fail to “walk their talk” (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010; Chan & Wong, 2012; Johnstone & Tan, 2015; McNeill & Moore, 2015), creating a “sustainable fashion paradox.” In other words, consumers share sustainability concerns and expect fashion companies to show social commitment; however, they do not exhibit SFPC behaviors themselves.

Sustainable fashion scholarship postulates various explanations for this consumption paradox. One research stream argues that product-related (e.g., product design and quality) and store-related (e.g., store design, environment, and convenience) attributes affect SFPC adoption (Chan & Wong, 2012). Results imply that fashion consumers perceive sustainable products as inferior to fast-fashion in terms of product and store attributes (Kim et al., 2014). As a result, consumers are reluctant to engage in SFPC. Other research suggests that fashion's very nature is to display consumer identity (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and fulfill the “insatiable demand for newness” (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 269). These intrinsic drives to be “fashionable” outweigh needs to be socially responsible (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Finally, young consumers may perceive sustainability and fashion as two separate constructs within their cognitive schemas (Kong et al., 2016). They may support sustainability, but consumers categorically separate this value from their purchases of fashion products (Joy et al., 2012).

Despite the various explanations regarding attitude–behavior discrepancy in SFPC, a compelling theoretical underpinning is lacking. Nevertheless, the emerging research concedes that fashion consumers are aware of sustainability issues, but they experience various sociological, perceptual, and motivational barriers that prevent them from participating in SFPC. Therefore, both practitioners and researchers need a deeper understanding of the consumer-centric processes and mechanisms for overcoming barriers.

2.2. Sustainable fashion paradox and Heider's balance theory

Heider's (1958) balance theory postulates that individuals generally seek to maintain internal harmony and order among their attitudes, values, and behaviors (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Levin, Davis, & Levin, 1996; Woodside, 2004; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). Accordingly, if elements are imbalanced, consumers are likely to change

their attitudes and/or behaviors to appropriately restore the equilibrium. Indeed, statements such as “my friends' enemies are my enemies” and “my enemies' enemies are my friends” illustrate balance theory's key premise (Dalakas and Levin, 2005, p. 91).

More specifically, Heider (1958) (cited in Woodside, 2004) explains that individuals perceive separate entities (e.g., persons, activities, or objects) as having unit and sentiment relationships. Unit relationship occurs if a perception that two entities belong together exists. Entities with positive or negative associations have a sentiment relationship. If entities have a balanced state:

the relations among the entities fit together harmoniously; there is no stress toward change. A basic assumption is that sentiment relations and unit relations tend toward a balanced state. This means that sentiments are not entirely independent of the perceptions of unit connections between entities and that the latter, in turn, are not entirely independent of sentiments. Sentiments and unit relations are mutually interdependent. It also means that if a balanced state does not exist, then forces toward this state will arise. If a change is not possible, the state of imbalance will produce tension (Heider, 1958, p. 201).

Furthermore, units are grounded in cognition and sentiments are grounded in affection, representing independent theoretical constructs (Woodside, 2004). When imbalance occurs, individuals try to eliminate the tension and resolve their psychological state of imbalance by changing their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Martin, 2010; Woodside & Chebat, 2001).

Heider's theory helps to understand the sustainable fashion paradox and SFPC behaviors. Specifically, fashion consumers are the individuals of interest. The two separate entities are their general attitudes toward sustainability issues (entity 1) and SFPC (entity 2). Informed by previous studies (Joy et al., 2012, is a notable exception), these two entities form a unit relationship. Fashion consumers perceive that sustainability issues and eco-fashion consumption belong together (Chan & Wong, 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Moreover, the two units display conflicting sentiments. Specifically, fashion consumers have positive sentiments toward entity 1 as evident from previous research documenting growing sustainability issue concerns (e.g., Joy et al., 2012; Keller et al., 2014). However, fashion consumers simultaneously have negative sentiments toward entity 2 due to their lack of engagement in SFPC behaviors (Chan & Wong, 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Thus, the sustainable fashion consumption paradox reflects a state of psychological imbalance for fashion consumers. Proposition 1: Sustainable fashion's attitude–behavior gap is a state of psychological imbalance.

Assuming the sustainable fashion paradox is a state of psychological imbalance, how should marketers to resolve this paradox? Heider (1958) suggests that consumers choose from three distinct paths to restore balance. The first alternative is developing negative sentiments toward sustainability issues. When consumers perceive sustainability and SFPC as representing the unit, and they both are unfavorable entities, sentiments are no longer in conflict. In the second scenario, the unit relationship between sustainability and SFPC is broken (Joy et al., 2012). Although the sentiments for both entities are in conflict, they are separate, avoiding imbalance. Third, developing a more positive orientation toward SFPC and maintaining the unit relationship between SFPC and sustainability achieves balance. In this last scenario, both the unit and sentiment relationships fit together positively and harmoniously, reducing or eliminating stress relating change. Among the three options, marketers should work toward the third alternative. Reminding fashion consumers that sustainability and SFPC behaviors are interconnected leads to the best outcome. Proposition 2: To resolve the sustainability fashion paradox, marketers helps consumers to develop more positive SFPC orientations and reinforces the perceived interconnectedness between sustainability issues and SFPC behaviors.

2.3. Sustainable fashion and luxury experiences

A focal practice of luxury branding is to foster cult-like unique brand cultures by staging memorable consumer experiences (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Seo, Buchanan-Oliver, & Cruz, 2015). Beyond superior functional features, luxury brands deliver sensory experiences to create social mystique and aura (Berthon, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2009). Staging experiences to teach consumers about the social value of luxury goods, inspire taste and appreciation (Brun & Castelli, 2013). The events cultivate a sense of escapism and personal relevance, and develop intimate consumer/brand relationships (Kim & Ko, 2012). Thus, luxury companies design and stage memorable consumer experiences to create superior customer-perceived value (Wiedmann & Hennings, 2013; Ko, Phau, & Aiello, 2016).

Recent studies draw parallels between sustainable fashion and luxury brands. In particular, growing research indicates that sustainability issues and luxury branding have complex co-influence interrelationships (Joy et al., 2012; Beckham & Voyer, 2014). Although sustainability concerns remain nascent, they shape consumer perceptions about luxury brands and perceived value (Kapferer & Michaut, 2015). On the other hand, luxury branding with “concomitant respect for artisans and the environment” fosters stronger pro-sustainability values among young fashion consumers (Joy et al., 2012). Luxury branding techniques and elements can apply to sustainable fashion marketing and vice-versa.

Interconnectedness between sustainable fashion and luxury branding suggest that staging memorable experiences for fashion consumers strengthens perceptions of the unit relationship between sustainability issues and SFPC, and develops a stronger SFPC orientation. Given that staged experiences offer proactive learning and consumer engagement (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011), sustainable fashion companies should consider staging memorable experiences associating with sustainable fashion to strengthen consumer orientation toward SFPC. Proposition 3: Staging memorable sustainable fashion experiences fosters a more positive orientation toward SFPC, while reinforcing the perceived interconnectedness between sustainability issues and SFPC behaviors.

3. Methods

The sustainable fashion literature is nascent—not rich enough yet to provide a sound conceptual foundation for investigating how staged experiences help overcome the sustainable fashion paradox. To investigate the three propositions, an exploratory study was conducted. Specifically, the study employed a multi-method participatory action research (PAR) investigation (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008) involving focus group interviews (FGIs), participant observations, and in-depth interviews with South Korean fashion consumers.

PAR, a methodological paradigm within consumer welfare research, is “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.1). The main purpose of such research is to develop knowledge for social action. PAR is an appropriate method for several reasons. First, action research is particularly useful for improving consumer welfare (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). Thus, encouraging fashion consumers to behave more sustainably is consistent with the study’s pursuits. Second, unlike other research traditions, PAR involves consumers throughout the research process (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). The sustainable fashion paradox is a consumer-centric problem requiring an emic (i.e. first-person) understanding of how consumers think, feel and behave (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011). Moreover, despite emerging interest over the last few years, sustainable fashion research remains nascent. Accordingly, collaborating with fashion consumers throughout the research process offers novel insights into SFPC. Finally, action researchers seek to develop knowledge that can be applied to cultivate “change across individuals, group, and national behaviors and develop solutions in collaboration with consumers that are also sensitive to their needs and desires” (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, p.424). Fashion

consumers are aware of sustainability concerns, but they encounter various barriers that prevent them from SFPC behaviors. Thus, consumers participating in this action research project may learn to overcome such barriers.

3.1. Research design

This study focuses on young adult consumers of fashion products in Seoul, South Korea. Young consumers tend to be highly involved in fashion, attracted to trends, and drawn to unique differentiating products (Belleau, Summers, Xu, & Pinel, 2007). Furthermore, they tend to be the key purchasers of fast-fashion products, a major concern for sustainability (Joy et al., 2012). The research team was particularly interested in developing a deeper understanding of how young consumers perceive sustainable fashion, and how they can be encouraged to be more engaged with SFPC.

Study participants were recruited from a large private university in Seoul, South Korea. The sample included 12 men and 12 women ranging from 23 to 30 years old, self-identifying themselves as interested in and knowledgeable about current fashion trends, and reporting at least some familiarity with sustainable fashion. They were not required to have prior experience in purchasing sustainable fashion products. These criteria reflect the researchers’ interest in issues relating to barriers preventing SFPC behaviors. Consistent with the PAR approach, participants were informed that the research project’s purpose was to study how consumers can be encouraged to purchase sustainable fashion products. Participants were told that their participation would help to develop novel solutions for sustainable fashion consumption practices (Ko et al., 2013). Table 1 shows brief participant profiles.

A two-stage iterative analysis was adopted to uncover and explore the three propositions concerning sustainable fashion consumption. At the first stage, twenty-four participants were assigned to four focus groups of six people each. Focus groups were interviewed once from October to November 2015. During the focus group interviews (FGIs), broad guidance questions were used to open and facilitate discussion. For example, “What do you think about eco-friendly fashion products and brands?” These questions were aimed at deriving themes related to perceptions about sustainability issues and SFPC, possibly indicating a state of psychological imbalance (Proposition 1). Preliminary findings indicate that participants perceived sustainability to be an important

Table 1
Participant profiles.

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Monthly fashion spending (USD equiv.)	PAR observation
1	30	M	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
2	30	M	Postgraduate	\$400–\$500	NO
3	30	M	Postgraduate	>\$100	YES
4	32	M	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
5	26	F	Undergraduate	\$100–\$300	YES
6	25	F	Undergraduate	\$100–\$300	YES
7	30	F	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
8	31	F	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
9	28	F	Postgraduate	\$300–\$500	NO
10	23	M	Undergraduate	\$300–\$500	NO
11	35	F	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
12	30	M	Postgraduate	\$500–\$700	YES
13	29	F	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
14	26	F	Postgraduate	\$300–\$500	NO
15	25	F	Postgraduate	>\$100	YES
16	26	M	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
17	30	F	Postgraduate	\$100–\$300	NO
18	25	F	Undergraduate	\$100–\$300	YES
19	26	M	Undergraduate	>\$100	NO
20	26	M	Undergraduate	>\$100	NO
21	26	F	Postgraduate	\$300–\$500	YES
22	25	M	Postgraduate	\$500–\$700	YES
23	23	M	Undergraduate	\$500–\$700	NO
24	30	M	Postgraduate	\$300–\$500	NO

issue in fashion, but they had mixed opinions and feelings about whether or not they wanted to engage in SFPC behaviors. Thus, the FGIs offered initial supporting evidence that the attitude–behavior gap in sustainable fashion is a state of psychological imbalance. The next section provides a more detailed discussion of the emergent themes.

The second stage, explored how staged experiences may restore psychological imbalances by fostering more positive SFPC orientations, while reinforcing the perceived interconnectedness between sustainability issues and SFPC behaviors (Propositions 2 and 3). Several PAR observations were conducted with eight participants from the initial sample (Participants 3, 5, 6, 12, 16, 18, 21, and 22), and staged individualized sustainable fashion consumption experiences. More specifically, two eco-fashion brand stores in Seoul permitted participants to partake in an exclusive shopping experience at the stores between January and May 2016. Ozanne and Saatcioglu (2008) suggest that research participants become valuable co-contributors if their goals aligned with the research objectives (i.e., to create positive social change). Prior to the staged visits, participants were informed that the researchers' goal was to learn how personal shopping experiences foster deeper considerations about sustainable fashion consumption.

Next, each participant was given money (approx. USD \$180) to spend in the two eco-fashion stores. One author accompanied participants and closely observed their comparison of alternatives and purchase behaviors. After the shopping, each person participated in a semi-structured long interview to question them about their experiences (McCracken, 1988). Stage two participants were interviewed twice—immediately after visiting each store.

The final analysis combined results to determine whether and how the staged experiences may develop more positive SFPC orientations. During this process, several procedures were undertaken to ensure consistency and accuracy in interpretations. First, multiple methods of data collection were used to compare interpretations, including FGIs, PAR observations, and semi-structured interviews. Second, each researcher reviewed the data independently (inter-rater agreement was about 75–80%). Disparities were settled by iterative discussion and achieving a general consensus on the final themes.

4. Results

4.1. Sustainability in fashion and SFPC

Findings from the FGIs support the proposition that fashion consumers may experience a state of psychological imbalance regarding SFPC issues (P1). Specifically, respondents recognize the importance of sustainability considerations, but they have reservations about purchasing sustainable fashion products.

4.1.1. Attitudes toward sustainability in fashion

Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015), results show that young consumers perceive sustainability as an important issue in the fashion industry. They also recognize their own ability to make a difference through their consumption choices. For instance, one participant notes that fashion companies are shifting their purely profit-driven strategy toward considering sustainability issues because changing consumer preferences are putting pressure on the industry.

Sustainable fashion was not popular at one time, but environmental and social issues show growth possibilities...In the past, companies thought only about profits, but now they need sustainability for the brand's image and to fulfill consumer preferences (Participant 21).

Participants noted that they engage in pro-sustainable practices; however, they do not necessarily purchase sustainable fashion products. For instance, Participant 3 considers purchasing fashion products

from a second-hand shop to be more sustainable than buying eco-fashion products:

I think consumers of used goods contribute to sustainability and eco-friendliness. Even eco-friendly and sustainable products are new. Recycling unsold items is popular: it's all about the second-hand market. There are many second-hand markets like the one on NAVER (Korean website). Buying from the second-hand market is to practice sustainability and seems better to me.

Thus, a key theme emerging from the FGIs is that young consumers tend to be aware of sustainability concerns in fashion and they proactively act to address their concerns. Although informants describe various pro-sustainable consumption practices (e.g., purchasing second-hand clothing), they do not necessarily include SFPC behaviors.

4.1.2. Unwillingness to purchase sustainable fashion products

Consumers have various reasons for avoiding SFPC behaviors (Chan & Wong, 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015), but prior research offers little about their emic (i.e., first-person) perspectives. Study FGIs identify three distinct but interrelated themes describing why consumers are unwilling to purchase sustainable fashion products: (1) negative quality perceptions; (2) the lack of justification for paying a premium price; and (3) the lack of social awareness about the value of eco-fashion products.

First, participants reveal that they perceive sustainable fashion to be inferior in terms of product design and quality characteristics. Specifically, many associate eco-friendly products with unattractive appeals and limited selections: "I do not purchase sustainable fashion products because of their unattractive designs" (Participant 11, aged 35). "If their design, quality, and variety improve, I would be willing to purchase sustainable fashion products" (Participant 21, aged 26). Furthermore, established preconceptions that eco-fashion products lack quality dissuade consumers from justifying the price premiums. "Price is the most important. I will never buy eco-fashion products if they are ridiculously expensive" (Participant 1, aged 30). "I do not feel the need to buy eco-fashion products. In the case of X brand, sustainability intentions are a good principle, but the products are costly and aesthetically unappealing" (Participant 2, aged 30).

Crucially, FGIs reveal that the nexus of overpriced and poor quality perceptions may come from lack of awareness and social capital surrounding knowledge about eco-fashion rather than actual product performance. Specifically, participants note that they have few opportunities to learn about sustainable fashion through media and/or consumption experiences. This lacuna negatively impacts their personal perceptions of eco-fashion products. "Sustainable fashion brands do not organize fashion shows and or advertise to any extent" (Participant 2, aged 30). As clothing purchase decisions are a tactile experience, looking at new products likely is not enough to sway many consumers. "Advertisements alone will not encourage sustainability: people must use and experience products before they will feel familiar enough to buy them" (Participant 15, aged 25).

In conclusion, the emergent themes support P1. Results demonstrate an attitude–behavior gap exists in sustainable fashion that creates a state of psychological imbalance. Specifically, fashion consumers express concern about fashion sustainability issues, but they are unwilling to engage in SFPC due to established negative perceptions about eco-fashion products. While sustainability and SFPC issues form a unit relationship, consumers display conflicting sentiments toward sustainable fashion and SFPC.

4.2. Staged experiences and consumer orientation toward SFPC

To explore how staged sustainable fashion experiences may help consumers overcome their psychological imbalance, results from structured PAR observations show that such experiences can reinforce the link between sustainability issues and SFPC and foster a more positive

consumer orientation toward SFPC, supporting P2 and P3. Specifically, the consumers who underwent staged experiences: (1) extended their practical knowledge about sustainable fashion products; (2) became more open to adopting SFPC behaviors; and (3) developed personalized competencies that encourage future SFPC behaviors.

First, the staged experiences taught study participants about sustainable fashion products and demystified some of their previous misconceptions about SFPC. For instance, they previously assumed that eco-fashion products have design and selection limitations. Shopping visits to eco-fashion stores changed their opinions. Study participants viewing, touching, and wearing the eco-friendly garments have a more favorable impression.

“I used to think sustainable products are only about reforming or eco-friendliness. But sustainable product categories are wide-ranging. Especially in the first store, I gained new insight into the classiness of sustainable products” (Participant 18, aged 25). “Before, I thought that so-called sustainable or eco-friendly fashion implied lower quality and less attractive design. But the store visit showed me that the brand has design, workmanship, and quality, beyond just eco-friendliness” (Participant 21, aged 26).

As participants gained more practical knowledge about eco-fashion products, they express a willingness and intention to learn more about sustainable fashion and even to engage in future SFPC behaviors.

I learned from the stores that sustainable fashion considers social initiatives such as animal protection and fair labor. Some leather products in the second store came from animals that died naturally rather than being killed, which gains my sympathy as I keep a pet. This should be encouraged more. Also, I learned that the store has lots of practical and usable products and diverse product categories (Participant 21, aged 26).

I had no expectations, but now I think the design is unique, and the material is not bad. I would shop here again. Also, I thought the products would be ugly, but after hearing that they collaborated with a designer, I saw the products as different and pretty. The biggest change was that I liked the peculiar design (Participant 5, aged 26).

Finally, the staged experiences encouraged fashion consumers to develop unique competencies allowing them to draw on their previous knowledge to make more effective choices and decisions about SFPC. In particular, many participants now have evaluative criteria regarding attributes that could make a sustainable fashion brand more attractive.

Being eco-friendly requires quality and durability. Recycled or eco-friendly materials are not sustainable if they forgo quality. The second store has mediocre design and quality: I saw a very poor-quality small wallet, regardless of the hand or machine sewing. The bags were poorly finished and only halfway done... The first store, run by a large enterprise, is classy and refined, just like a real high-profile brand store (Participant 3, aged 30).

I prefer the second sustainable fashion brand which provides information such as country of origin, raw materials, profile of product makers, and meanings related to the products. In contrast, the first sustainable fashion brand's products fail to give detailed product information. The second sustainable fashion brand is warmer. The store is good at transmitting the meaning of sustainable issues (Participant 21, aged 26).

Participant 3 states that sustainable products should have superior quality and durability because poor quality products must be replaced more frequently. Consequently, his most important consideration for purchasing eco-fashion products is brand reputation that signals quality. Participant 21 notes that sustainable fashion brands should provide more details positioning themselves as valuing sustainability. Thus,

staged experiences promote consumer learning about SFPC and encourage consumers to develop personalized criteria for differentiating between various SFPC alternatives.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study demonstrates that fashion consumers' limited awareness and knowledge about sustainable fashion products may promote negative sentiments toward SFPC. However, the findings demonstrate that fashion marketers can overcome negative sentiments by staging personalized experiences. Specifically, the staged experiences enable fashion consumers to acquire practical knowledge about sustainable fashion and thus become more open to adopting SFPC behaviors. Traditional communication tools, such as advertising and public relations, encounter difficulty in trying to foster sustainable fashion consumer literacy. Thus, staged consumption experiences are an essential platform to conveying design and quality. Furthermore, staged experiences develop individualized competencies that may guide SFPC decisions and choices. Understanding how consumers acquire competencies and evaluate sustainable fashion, provides marketers with important insights for effective eco-fashion brand positioning strategies.

This study demonstrates another application of Heider's (1958) balance theory and staged brand experiences in marketing. Participatory action investigation of SFPC in South Korea demonstrates that developing and staging consumer-centered experiences help balance the psychological imbalance occurring in the attitude–behavior gap between sustainability concerns and SFPC behaviors. Results suggest participants likely will adopt more positive SFPC orientations (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Such experiences reinforce the connection between sustainability concerns and SFPC, heighten the personal relevance of SFPC behaviors, convey practical knowledge about SFPC, encourage openness to SFPC, and develop consumer competencies for performing SFPC behaviors.

Although this study offers several novel insights, all studies have limitations that serve as opportunities for future inquiry. First, this study was conducted using a student sample; albeit we recruited more mature students (seniors and postgraduate students). Further study that includes a sample which is not affiliated with the university will provide external validation. Second, behavior change is a long-term process. The present study could be extended to provide a more complete understanding of the longitudinal process necessary to overcome psychological imbalances. For example, an ethnographic research approach likely will uncover richer insights. Furthermore, the present study focusing on individual consumer experiences, but future research may explore how social norms (e.g., cultural values) and reference groups (e.g., brand communities) may shape or reinforce SFPC. Finally, this study focuses on young fashion enthusiasts in Korea, a highly motivated fashion consumer segment. To better understand how consumers may interpret SFPC and staged experiences and to corroborate the findings, future studies should include consumers in other countries such as Europe and the United States and other population segments such as mature consumers.

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