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

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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.

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## 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.

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