The Role of Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence in Predicting Green Apparel Consumption Behavior of American Youth

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract - In recent years, considering that consumers are giving more importance to their role and consequence with regards to social and environmental implication of their consumption decisions, there has been increase in ethical consumption research. However, to date, the role of individual susceptibility to interpersonal influence and other relevant factors (e.g., environmental apparel knowledge) have not been studied. Therefore, the present study explored several critical constructs related to green apparel consumption including consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII). The present study focused on American youth (n = 1,049). Based on extant literature review, a hypothesized model was proposed. To test research hypotheses, structural modeling technique was implemented. The results showed that the proposed research model explained 68% of the variance in green apparel consumption behavior of American youth. Furthermore, it was found that environmental apparel knowledge had a significant positive influence on general environmentally responsible behavior, in turn, which influenced green apparel consumption behavior. On the contrary, consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence did not positively influence general environmentally responsible behavior. Marketing implications, strategies, and limitations of the present research study are discussed.

Keywords - Consumer susceptibility, Green consumption, Apparel knowledge, Environmentally responsible behavior

Relevance to Marketing Educator, Researchers and/or Practitioners - Since the awareness about environmental sustainability is growing, results of

this study on green apparel consumption behavior of American youth provide interesting insights to marketing educators, researchers, and practitioners. General environmentally responsible behavior was important predictor of green apparel consumption behavior. Green apparel companies should design marketing strategies to inform youth about the benefits of green products. For young consumer segment, the purchase and consumption decision of products may not require approval from others. Marketing researchers should further investigate the relationships among knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and behavior associated with green products.

Introduction

In recent years, green fashion is booming (Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012; Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014). The primary driving forces being purchase motivations based on: (1) health and (2) contribution to the welfare of the society (Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012). However, it is important to note that conceptualization of "green," "sustainable," "ethical," or "eco" fashion is problematic. First, the aforementioned terms have been used interchangeably; thereby, creating confusion among consumers and companies alike (Charter, 1992). Second, this confusion has led to lack of definitive knowledge related to green fashion. Finally, the concept of "green fashion" is a bit oxymoronic, because fashion promotes short-cycles and consumption, whereas, green is related to durability, sustainability, and recycling of products (Morgan and Birtwhistle, 2009). The aforementioned drawbacks were pervasive among consumers and companies few years ago.

Thus, it becomes imperative to define ethical fashion before the topic is delved any further. As per Ethical Fashion Forum (cited in Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012, p. 177), ethical fashion is defined as, "an approach to design, sourcing and manufacture of clothing which maximizes benefits to people and communities while minimizing impact on the environment." Therefore, ethical fashion generates social as well as environmental value (Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012). In recent years, increasingly consumers are giving importance to their role and consequences with regards to social and environmental implication of their consumption decisions (Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014); thereby, creating a niche market for ethical fashion (Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012).

Therefore, in order to understand the growing green fashion market, it is crucial that various facets related to green fashion consumption is explored. Needless to say, marketing research firms (e.g., Mintel) and academic papers (e.g., Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014) have focused on green fashion consumption. For example, Manchiraju and Sadachar (2014) explored the relationship between consumers' personal values and their relationship with ethical fashion consumption. Likewise, copious other studies have focused on

green fashion consumption (e.g., Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012; Cervellon et al., 2011; Kim and Damhorst, 1998). However, to date, the role of individual susceptibility and other relevant factors (e.g., environmental apparel knowledge) have not been studied. Hence, the purpose of the present study was to determine whether consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence, environmental apparel knowledge, and general environmentally responsible behavior affect green fashion consumption. In the next section, based on extant literature, a research model with hypotheses is proposed based on aforementioned constructs.

Literature Review

The proposed research model in the present study is based on social learning theory proposed by Bandura (1977), which states that human behavior is a result of continuous reciprocal interaction among cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants (Latham and Saari, 1979). In other words, as stated by Bandura (1977): "In the social learning view, people are neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted by environmental stimuli. Rather, psychological functioning is explained in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants" (p. 11).

Therefore, from social learning theory perspective, human thought, affect, and behavior are influenced by observation as well as by direct experience. This proposition is also consistent with other theories such as Skinner's operant theory (1938) and Bandura's social cognitive theory (2001). For example, Bandura (2001) stated that "internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bi-directionally" (p. 14-15). Consistent with social learning theory, the various research constructs in the proposed research model are explained briefly, followed by hypothesized relationships.

Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (CSII)

It has been noted that humans are susceptible to interpersonal influence (Bearden et al., 1989). In fact, it has been proposed that consumers' attitudes, norms, values, aspirations, and purchase behavior development are influenced by interpersonal influence (Stafford and Cocanougher, 1977). According to Bearden et al. (1989), CSII is touted to be an individual trait, which is defined as, "the need to identify with or enhance one's image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others or seeking information from others" (p. 473). Bearden et al.'s (1989) conceptualization is based on previous research related to influencability and how individuals differ in their response to social influence (e.g., Allen, 1965; McGuire, 1968). For example, it has been found that

individuals who score low on self-esteem are more susceptible to interpersonal influence (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1981).

Bearden et al. (1989) contend that consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII) has been quite neglected in consumer behavior and marketing literature. Drawing from the works of Deutsch and Gerard (1955), Bearden et al. (1989) focused on CSII to consist of two dimensions—*normative* and *information* influence. CSII-normative influence refers to conformity to expectations of others (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). On the other hand, CSII-informative influence refers to an individual's tendency to accept information from others as reality (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Both, normative and informative influences have been associated with consumer behavior (e.g., see Pincus and Waters, 1977).

Environmental Apparel Knowledge

Although, the concept of knowledge has been classified into many kinds (e.g., declarative, conditional, etc…see Schraw, 1998), in the present study, knowledge is defined as "knowing about things." Therefore, environmental apparel knowledge refers to consumers' knowledge of the impact of apparels on environment (Kim and Damhorst, 1998). For example, how much consumers know about the impact of processing of textile fibers on environment, consumers' knowledge about which fibers can be recycled, and their awareness about whether regulatory policies are imposed on textile companies to control the air and water pollution. Earlier research (Kim and Damhorst, 1998) which tested consumers' environmental apparel knowledge found that consumers are more knowledgeable regarding the environmental impact of chemical processes (e.g., dyeing), disposable diapers, and detergents.

General Environmentally Responsible Behavior

In general, behavior refers to "the manner of conducting oneself" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2015). It is important to note that there are different classifications of behavior (e.g., risky, deviance, etc…). However, in the present study, general environmentally responsible behavior refers to conducting one's actions, which are consistent with environmentally friendly conduct (e.g., recycling). People engage themselves in various activities to protect the environment. For example, some people take part in recycling of bottles, cans, and newspapers by returning them frequently to recycling centers. Some people may prefer to buy reusable products rather than disposable goods so that they cause less impact on the environment. Some consumers may engage themselves in environmental groups or organizations and avoid buying products from companies which are not environmental friendly. All such behavior comes under the umbrella of general environmentally responsible behavior (Kim and Damhorst, 1998).

Hypotheses

Relationship between CSII and General Environmentally Responsible Behavior

In general, several theories (e.g., the theory of planned behavior, Ajzen, 1991; Manchiraju et al., 2012) have noted the role of social influence on green fashion consumption. For example, Manchiraju et al. (2012) found that social norms (or influence) directly influenced an individual's behavioral intention to engage in sustainable green fashion consumption. Similarly, various studies (e.g., Lee, 2008; Peattie, 2010) have noted the importance of social influence on individual's green consumption. For instance, Lee (2008) proposed a theoretical model with seven predictor variables for green consumption behavior, out of which social influence was found to be the strongest predictor among adolescent Chinese consumers. Also, social learning theory proposes that individual's behavior does not occur in isolation (Bandura, 1977), but also occurs due to social interactions. Similar findings in which others influence on behavior (green consumption or otherwise) has been noted by several netnographic studies (e.g., Cervellon and Wernerfelt, 2012). Therefore, based on the literature reviewed, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: CSII-Normative specific to green consumption will positively influence general environmentally responsible behavior.

H2: CSII-Informative specific to green consumption will positively influence general environmentally responsible behavior.

Relationship between Environmental Apparel Knowledge and General Environmentally Responsible Behavior

An attitude is, "an enduring set of beliefs about an object that predispose people to behave in particular ways toward the object" (Weigel, 1983, p. 257). In other words, one's attitude constitutes one's knowledge, which is either learned through direct experience or observation of others' (see social learning theory, Bandura, 1977). Thus, one might expect people with pro-environmental attitude (also knowledge) to act or conduct oneselves in ways consistent with one's knowledge or attitude (e.g., recycling, Mainieri et al., 1997). Consistently, several studies (e.g., Manchiraju et al., 2012; Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014; Simmons and Widmar, 1990) have found a positive relationship between one's belief or knowledge related to the environment and eco-friendly behavior. Furthermore, Mainieri et al. (1997) noted that domain specific knowledge (e.g., beliefs about recycling apparel) influences general behavior (e.g., environmentally friendly behavior). Therefore, consistent with the literature reviewed, the following hypotheses are proposed:
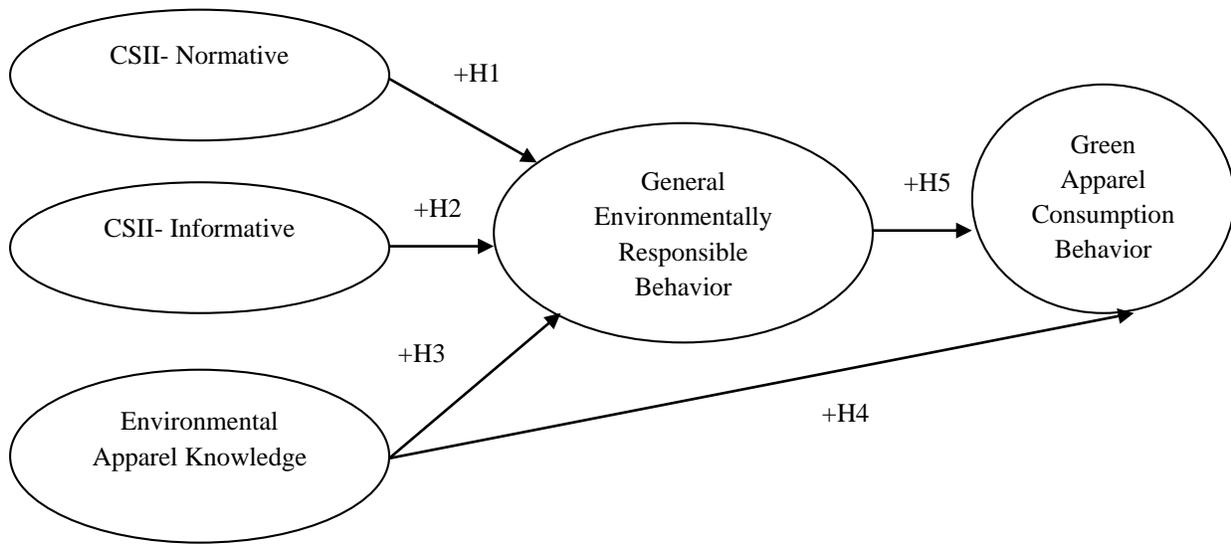
H3: Environmental apparel knowledge will positively influence general environmentally responsible behavior.

H4: Environmental apparel knowledge will positively influence green apparel consumption behavior.

Relationship between General Environment Behavior and Green Apparel Consumption Behavior

It is often assumed that individuals who engage in one kind of environmentally friendly behavior (e.g., carpooling) will also engage in other pro-environmental behaviors (e.g., recycling household waste) noted Mainieri et al. (1997). Consistently, prior research has focused on general pro-environmental behavior and antecedents of such behavior (e.g., beliefs, collectivism, etc…, Kim and Choi, 2005). Likewise, several studies have noted the role of past behavior on behavioral intention to engage in subsequent [pro-environment] behavior (e.g., Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Verplanken and Orbell, 2003). For example, in the context of organic vegetable consumption, Sparks and Shepherd (1992) found that past behavior predicted future behavioral intention to engage in organic vegetable consumption. Thus, based on the literature (Mainieri et al., 1997; Sparks and Shepherd, 1992), the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: General environmentally responsible behavior will positively influence green apparel consumption behavior.

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model showing Relationships among Research Variables

Method

Sample and Procedure

An online survey method was used to collect data. A total of 1,049 (Male = 337) usable surveys were collected from students (age 18-30) enrolled at large U.S. Midwesten university. The survey included 5-point Likert-type scales measuring: consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden et al., 1989), environmental apparel knowledge (Kim and Damhorst, 1998), general environmentally responsible behavior (Kim and Damhorst, 1998), and green apparel consumption behavior (Kim and Damhorst, 1998). All scales used 5-point Likert-type scales (*1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree*). Demographic questions were also included in the survey.

Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence was measured by 12 items (8 items for CSII Normative and 4 items for CSII Informational, Bearden et al., 1989). For example, one of the items for measuring CSII-Normative was, "It is important that others like the products and brands that I buy", and for measuring CSII Informative was, "I frequently gather information from friends and family members about a product before I buy." Environmental apparel knowledge was measured by 11 items (Kim and Damhorst, 1998). The scale measured participant's knowledge of the impact of apparel products on the environment. Items consisted of measuring consumers' knowledge about processing fibers, recyclability of fibers, contribution of textile products to waste disposal, and by-products from cleaning agents. For example, one of the items was, "Chemical pollutants are produced during manufacturing of synthetic or manufactured fibers such as polyester." General environmentally responsible behavior was measured by 14 items (Kim and Damhorst, 1998). One of the items in this scale was, "I recycle bottles, cans or glass." Green apparel consumption behavior was measured by 8 items (Kim and Damhorst, 1998). For example, one of the items was, "I buy apparel made from recycled material."

Data Analysis

A variety of statistical procedures were employed in the analysis of the survey data. First, descriptive statistics were performed on participants' demographic characteristics (See Table 1). Second, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS 22.0 program was conducted with items for each construct to identify the factor structures. Third, the internal consistency of scales was calculated using Cronbach's α coefficient. Fourth, the measurement model (confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)) and the structural equation modeling (SEM) were tested using the advanced statistical package MPlus 6.0. The structural model allowed for testing the hypotheses (*H1-H5*) depicted in Figure 1.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample

Demographics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	337	32
Female	711	68
Marital Status		
Married	38	4
Single	1008	96
Age		
18-24 Years	940	90
25-30 Years	105	10

A total of 1049 useable responses were collected. (See Table 1). The sample consisted mostly: female respondents (68%), single students (96%), and students between the ages of 18 and 24 years (90%).

Using EFA, items exhibiting low factor loadings (< .40) were deleted. Additionally, items with high cross loadings (> .30) or low communalities were eliminated (Hair et al., 1998). This process resulted in deleting 1 item from CSII-Normative, 1 item from CSII-Informational, 5 items from environmental apparel knowledge, 6 items from general environmentally responsible behavior, and 2 items from green apparel consumption behavior.

After EFA, internal consistency of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's α for a minimum acceptable level of .70 (Hair et al., 1998). All constructs satisfied this requirement. Cronbach's α for constructs were: CSII-Normative .91, CSII-Informational .80, environmental apparel knowledge .86, general environmentally responsible behavior .85, and green apparel consumption behavior .88.

Measurement Model and Structural Model

Measurement model consisting of CSII (two-factor), environmental apparel knowledge, general environmentally responsible behavior, and green apparel consumption behavior (one-factor each) was tested through structural equation modeling (SEM) using a maximum-likelihood estimation procedure to ensure the convergent validity. CFA indicated that the measurement model had an

acceptable model fit and all factor loadings were statistically significant (p < .001).

Subsequent structural model was run to test the hypothesized relationships which showed an acceptable model fit (χ^2 = 1867.19, df = 456, p = .000, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05). Based on standardized path coefficients and significance levels, CSII-Normative (*H1*) negatively influenced general environmentally responsible behavior (ß = -.077, p = .028), environmental apparel knowledge (*H3*) positively influenced general environmentally responsible behavior (ß = .323, p = .000), environmental apparel knowledge (*H4*) negatively influenced green apparel consumption (ß = -.111, p = .000), and general environmentally responsible behavior (*H5*) positively influenced green apparel consumption behavior (ß = .849, p = .000). The relationship between CSII-Informational and general environmentally responsible behavior (*H2*) was not significant. In total, the hypothesized model explained 68% of variance in green apparel consumption behavior (R^2 = .68, p = .000). See Figure 2 for results.

Specifically discussing about the result of *H4*, the correlation between the environmental apparel knowledge and green apparel consumption behavior was positive but these variables resulted in a negative regression weight. This situation is referred to as negative suppression (Maassen and Bakker, 2001). It is advised not to conclude that a relationship contrary to that expected is operating (Maassen and Bakker, 2001; Pedhazur, 1982). Therefore, at best we can say that *H4* was not supported.
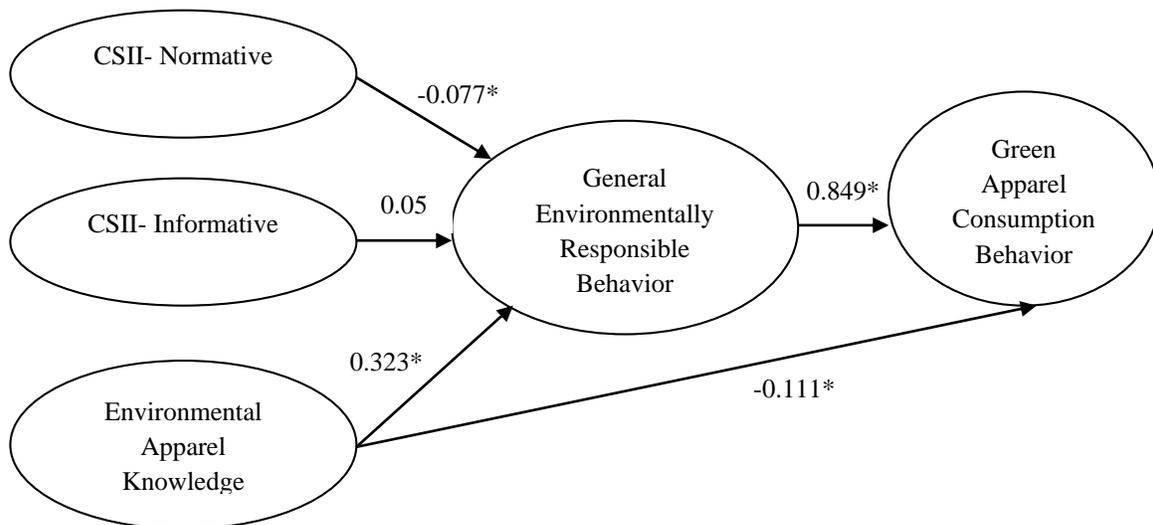
Figure 2: Structural Path Coefficients among Research Variables

Notes: * Significant standardized estimates shown; p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.68
Model fit indices: χ^2 = 1867.19, df = 456, p = .000, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the study provide interesting insights about green apparel consumption behavior of American youth. Earlier research suggests that social influence affects green attitudes and consumption (Chan, 2000; Haanpaa, 2007; Kalafatis et al., 1999; Kim and Chung, 2011; Lee, 2008; Phau and Ong, 2007). However, the results posit that normative values had negative influence on general environmentally responsible behavior and informative values had no influence. This suggests that green apparel lines may be perceived as premium product and not among regular apparel lines, youth may perceive it as connoting a lifestyle. The purchase and consumption decision of products may not require approval from others. Youth would prefer to purchase green products in order to stand out in crowd. It would enable to exhibit their green commitment and attitude. Green products would bestow a distinct identity and conformance from others may not be important.

Researchers opine that environment friendly values and consciousness leads to green product purchase (Mainieri et al., 1997; Jansson et al., 2010). Similar implications may be drawn from the findings of the present study. Youth conscious of environmental problems, recycling, and protecting environment are likely to purchase green products. An interesting insight from the research is the influence of environmental apparel knowledge on general environmentally responsible behavior. It suggests that youth with knowledge about green apparel production and its impact on society would exhibit green attitudes and behavior. However, green apparel knowledge does not necessarily translate into green apparel purchase and consumption. Environmental apparel knowledge had no impact on green apparel purchase and consumption decision. The findings differ from earlier research (e.g., Kim and Damhorst, 1998). General environmentally responsible behavior was important predictor of green apparel purchase. The findings are interesting as typically green apparel knowledge should translate into purchase. This suggests that companies should take steps to improve awareness about green apparel and its advantages.

Implications and Limitations

Earlier research has stated the importance of social influence on consumers' environment friendly behavior (Kim and Chung, 2011; Park and Sohn, 2012). Since general green behavior predicted American youth's green apparel purchase and consumption behavior, companies manufacturing green apparel can target youth who have knowledge about green issues. Green apparel manufacturers should design marketing strategies to inform youth about the benefits of green products. It is important to note that awareness about green products should lead to purchase. Youth are an important segment as they are interested in new fashion and styles. They are likely to purchase more green apparels than other

consumer groups. Green apparel can be marketed as new fashion so that they purchase it. Advertising messages for green apparel should focus on green consciousness and saving the environment. Green apparel product lines should combine style, latest designs, and trendy fashion. This would attract fashion conscious youth. Fashion designers can be used to create new styles which are in line with latest trends.

Advertisements should focus on advantages of pursuing green values. Opinion leaders can be used to highlight importance of protecting environment. This would create awareness among youth. Promotions of green apparel should encourage green purchase by offering incentives to youth. This should be closely related to green values and attitudes. Environment related issues can be used to emphasize importance of green apparel. Campaigns can be initiated in Universities to create awareness. Green apparel brands can use promotions in the colleges through college festivals, programs, and functions. Youth interested in environment protection can be included in these initiatives. Green apparel can be positioned as premium product using latest fashion. Relevant personalities can be used to give green apparel brands distinct look. The findings suggest that youth was not influenced by others in their decision to purchase green apparel. Therefore, it appears that green apparel purchase might be related to youth's self-identity, which might symbolically help them to communicate their commitment towards the environment.

The findings are important for both practitioners and policy makers. Lack of awareness among consumers about green apparel products, their impact on environment, and technologies used for manufacturing them is a major challenge for companies. However, a positive insight from the findings is that youth conscious about environment are likely to buy green apparel. Measures have to be taken by both governments and companies to create acceptability for green technologies for manufacturing green apparel. The advantages of pursuing pro-environmental behavior should be encouraged. Youth with environment friendly attitudes may be identified and used to publicize environmental issues and problems in the college premises. Celebrities pursuing environment friendly behavior can be used to promote green apparel brands. General environment friendly behavior was important in predicting green apparel purchase. Green apparel manufactures can create distinct space in retail stores to promote their brands. They can develop strategies to reward loyal consumers by using them as icons having green values. In college campaigns, they may be asked to share their beliefs and reasons for endorsing environment friendly values. This would help in creating awareness among youth. They would help in creating positive word-of-mouth publicity. Online media can be used for green promotional activities. Online communities and forums can help youth share their views about green apparel.

There is limited research on environmental friendly attitudes and behavior related to green apparel purchase. This is upcoming area as companies are

taking steps to reduce carbon emission and investing in green technologies. They are trying to spread awareness about green practices. Understanding youth's behavior on green apparel purchase can help them in positioning green apparel lines. However, there are few limitations related to the present study. The research focuses only on environmental concerns, social influence, and green apparel knowledge. It does not combine the role of other factors like self-identity, personal norms, and lifestyle choices. Self-identity and its impact on green apparel purchase can be explored in future study. Other factors like fashion consciousness, involvement with clothing and values can be studied with reference to youth's green apparel purchase. This will help companies in understanding individual factors related to green apparel purchase.

Acknowledgements

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