

From Fast to Sustainable: The Influence of Cycling Fashion Strategy of Fast Fashion Brands on Consumers' Purchase Intention

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Abstract. In the context of global green, the traditional fast fashion mode has been criticized for its high resource consumption and serious environmental pollution. Facing the huge wave of the era responsibility, how to effectively and high-quality to long-term sustainable development has become the core challenge of fast fashion brands. Based on the theory of values attitude behavior hierarchy, this study uses the experimental design between groups to compare and analyze the response differences of two circular fashion strategies (Upcycle vs. Recycle) implemented by consumers in the sustainable transformation of fast fashion brands, aiming to reveal the psychological mechanism and relative effectiveness of the two in driving consumer behavior. The results show that for fast fashion products, the Upcycle type of environmental protection strategy has a stronger positive impact on the purchase intention than the Recycle type of environmental protection strategy, and the perceived value plays an intermediary role in the Upcycle type of environmental protection strategy. The conclusion of this paper enriches the research of sustainable marketing strategy, widens the development direction of fast fashion field, and provides practical guidance for fast fashion brands to develop differentiated sustainable marketing strategies.

Keywords: Fast Fashion Brand, Circular Fashion Strategy, Upcycle, Recycle, Perceived Value.

1. Introduction

Driven by the global imperative for a circular economy, the fashion industry, as a significant source of resource consumption and environmental pollution, is facing transformation challenges [1]. According to research, the global apparel sector is responsible for the annual consumption of 93 billion cubic meters of water and discharges about 12 billion tons of carbon dioxide every year, more than 98 million tonnes of non-renewable feedstocks are channelled into the production of textiles and apparel [2]. Among them, in terms of both the magnitude of waste generated and the velocity of its expansion, the textile industry remains a critical global concern, especially fast fashion has a dramatic adverse effect on the clothing industry and the environment. In response to this challenge, the concept of circular economy has been widely introduced by fast fashion brands, of which recycling and upcycling are two core resource reuse modes, which are adopted by more and more fast fashion brands as key components of sustainable development strategies (such as the famous fast fashion clothing brand H&M has already invested in Renewcell and secured an offtake agreement with a pulp mill translating to a conversation of saving 50 million garments) [3,4]. Although upcycling and recycling belong to the category of circular economy, many existing studies call them "green economy" or "sustainable initiatives", ignoring the differences between the two in consumer psychological mechanisms, especially within the domain of fast fashion, the influence of these two types of environmental protection products on consumers' evaluation of fast fashion products has not yet been explored.

Therefore, this study seeks to systematically examine, through a comparative lens, the mechanisms by which upcycling and recycling strategies influence consumer purchase intention within the fast fashion sector. The research will focus on the differences of psychological action path behind the two types of environmental protection strategies and use the literature analysis method to search and read the relevant field data and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can better analyze the psychological mechanism differences between the two types of environmental protection strategies

and the driving force of consumers' purchase intention. The use of a single variable group comparison experiment can effectively compare the subtle differences between the two sustainable environmental protection strategies for consumers, reaction to the intermediary role of perceived value, and the two methods are conducive to the experiment. The ultimate goal of this study is to clarify the distinct psychological processes involved, which not only contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption and the circular economy but also informs strategic decision-making for fast fashion brands pursuing sustainability.

2. Literature review

With the change of the environment, some companies began to take green initiatives such as sustainable marketing and social responsibility as their core business philosophy to follow the times. Among them, slow fashion and second-hand and retro types of clothing gradually entered the public vision and received more and more support [2]. Fast fashion brands can't escape the torrent and step into a sustainable pace, using upcycling and recycling strategies for transformation. Upcycling is a relatively new sustainable production mode, which is characterized as "transforming discarded materials into new products that possess superior quality or value relative to their initial state ", because of its increasing demand, it has created a popular trend [5]. And recycling is to maintain the surplus value and make use of it, such as through new process recovery or remanufacturing for reconstruction, to introduce it into the market again [6].

Based on some previous studies, consumers are usually positive about products manufactures from recycled materials [6]. They found that consumers in different regions, i.e. developed countries, exhibit a higher level of acceptance towards products manufactured from recycled materials, while some developing countries have a lower understanding of this category [7]. Other researchers found that the identifiability of goods crafted from reclaimed materials affects consumer recognition and purchase intention to a certain extent [7]. For example, within an Asian sample, 22% believed that the ecological label as a sign determines the subsequent response of consumers to the product [8]. Some scholars also deeply analysed the behaviour mechanism of the impact on consumers' wishes, because the products made of recycled materials are regarded as "Green", "recycling" and "Environmental Protection" by consumers, the perceived 'greenness' of a product is significantly and positively associated with consumer trust and attitude [7,9]. For example, some researchers have shown that the sense of pride and novelty brought by green products greatly improves consumers' purchase willingness [9].

In summary, at present, a substantial body of literatures mainly focus on the impact of products made of recycled materials on consumers' purchase intention from the perspective of environment and cognition. Compared with the overall discussion, fast fashion brands need more detailed research to discuss the subtle differences between the two types of environmental protection strategies of upgrading and recycling and consumers' wishes. Therefore, this paper focuses on the differences of psychological action path behind the two types of environmental protection strategies to fill in the gap in the field of circular economy.

3. Theoretical analysis and research hypothesis

3.1. Environmental protection strategies and consumers' purchase intention

Both the upcycled products and recycled products are based on the existing materials, and the distinction lies in whether they decompose the original products. The upcycled products made from materials need more creativity, aesthetic quality and exquisite workmanship, which also means that consumers will think that the upcycled items as more creative and novel than recycled ones [9]. And fast fashion consumers are mainly young groups, most of them have higher demand for "trend", "personality" and "expression". Because consumers who buy green products can show their green environmental protection attitude, and the upcycled products can provide additional benefits related

to consumers' unique needs, so the upcycled products is more suitable for this demand (for example, the "Join Life" series created by sustainable materials and the upgrading workshop of UNIQLO launched by ZARA in recent years, as shown in Figure 1) [2,9]. In contrast, recycled products are mostly in the form of single recycling, lacking novelty and creativity. Therefore, for fast fashion products, compared with the Recycle type of environmental conservation strategy, the Upcycle type of environmental protection strategy may have a more positive impact on consumers' purchase intention. Thus:

H1: For fast fashion products, the positive impact of the Upcycle type of environmental protection strategy on the purchase intention is significantly stronger than the Recycle type of environmental protection strategy.



Fig. 1 UNIQLO upgrading and recycling marketing strategy display (picture from UNIQLO official website) [10].

3.2. Perceived value

Nowadays, when facing sustainable products, consumers not only pay attention to functional value, but also increasingly attach importance to their social value and environmental responsibility. Studies have shown that function, social morality and emotional values exert a positive influence on consumers' attitudes toward sustainable products, and at the same time, these values foster favourable attitudes toward consumers' green purchase intention [11]. Under the premise above, consumer perceived value is of paramount importance in the formation of consumer purchase intention. In the past, many scholars defined perceived value as the total perception of consumers on product utility based on their own and product perception [12]. Later, more multidimensional explanations were put forward, and different scholars' definitions of perceived value were mentioned. The basic definition is that green, function, emotion and social value are important factors of perceived value [5]. Upcycling will not reduce the original quality and composition of the product and upgrade it [13]. Compared with other products, the upcycled products are cost-effective, which means that consumers may more easily perceive the value of the upcycled products [14]. Upcycled products play a pivotal role in the field of environmental protection. The production process requires less energy and resources. Consumers will recognize the green characteristics of upcycled products and think that they have environmental protection value [5]. In addition, when fast fashion brands produce products quickly, they can take the story background of upcycled products as a unique selling point, so that consumers can easily feel the emotional value [15]. Recycled products, especially upcycled ones, serve as a vehicle for self-expression and identity construction. Consumers feel status and pride in buying two types of products [5,9]. Therefore, perceived value may play an intermediary role between Upcycle type environmental protection strategies and consumers' purchase intention. To sum up, make the following assumptions (as shown in Figure 2):

H2: Perceived value plays an intermediary role between Upcycle type environmental protection strategy and purchase intention.

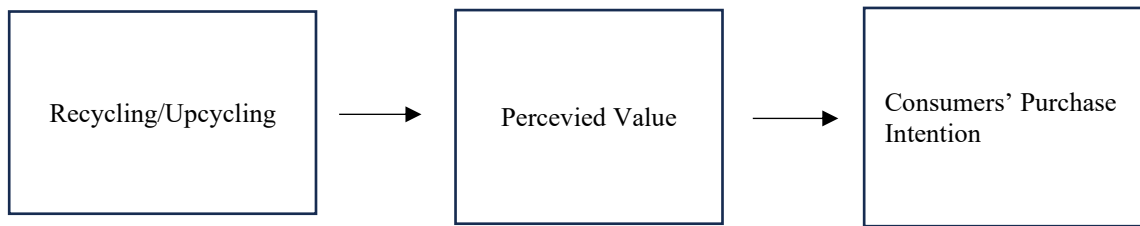


Fig. 2 Theoretical framework.

4. Research

4.1. Data collection

This study adopts the experimental design between single factor groups, the main purpose is to test the impact of Upcycle type environmental protection strategies and Recycle type environmental protection strategies on consumers' purchase intention (H1). At the same time, verify the psychological mechanism of Upcycle type environmental protection strategies on consumers' purchase intention. A total of 107 Chinese Credamo users participated in this study. In the past literature, experiments between subjects were used to obtain the sample survey [9]. This study refers to this method and manipulates a sustainable fast fashion product (Recycle vs. Upcycle). In the experiment, the interviewees will read two sustainable products (Recycle vs. Upcycle) launched by a fast fashion brand. In this study, the known fast fashion brand is not used. In addition, no product pictures will be put in the experiment, to avoid the interviewees' aesthetic preference affecting the product evaluation. The interviewees read two kinds of recycled or upcycled products launched by fast fashion brands. In the experiment, the text content length of fast fashion products is the same, and the recycling and upcycling are explained.

4.2. Measures

All the measured values are from past literature, using the seven-point scale to measure, with high reliability and more accurate comparative analysis. The dependent variable is the attitude of consumers towards the two products. The perception of new product purchase intention was measured through two items. The interviewees were asked that their overall purchase intention for the product was high (1= very low, 7= very high). The interviewees were willing to recommend such products to their friends (1= extremely reluctant, 7= extremely willing). The perceived value of new products was measured through seven projects. For the green perception of products, the interviewees were asked to think that the products can help reduce environmental pollution (1= extremely disagree, 7= extremely agree), and that such products conform to the concept of environmental protection (1= extremely disagree, 7= extremely agree). For product function perception, the interviewees were asked to pay a slightly higher price for such products (1= extremely reluctant, 7= extremely willing). For the emotional perception of the product, the interviewees were asked to think that the product has a unique design and aesthetic (1= very disagree, 7= very agree), that this kind of product is creative and refreshing (1= very disagree, 7= very agree), that buying this kind of product is a kind of self-expression (1= very disagree, 7= very agree), and that buying this kind of product is a kind of self-expression (1= very disagree, 7= very agree). For the social perception of products, the interviewees thought that such products were more meaningful than ordinary fast fashion products (1= extremely disagree, 7= extremely agree).

In the design among the interviewees, study allocated 107 participants from the Credamo platform to one of two experimental conditions: the recycling scenario and the upcycling scenario. After excluding 24 respondents who have never bought fast fashion products due to environmental protection, this study analyzes the data of the remaining 83 respondents.

4.3. Results

After collection and integration, the samples cover various regions in China, with a high concentration in North China and East China, which may affect the comprehensive inference of the cognitive differences of national consumer environmental protection strategies. Among the interviewees, there were 67 female interviewees, accounting for 62.6%, and most of them were 21–30-year-olds, accounting for 54.2%. In the sample, most of the respondents (70.1%) included environmental protection strategies or sustainable information into the scope of fashion consumption. This information provides an important premise for this study to explore sustainable strategies in fast fashion products - consumers are potential responders with cognitive basis and attitude. Among the respondents, 83 (accounting for 77.6%) said that they had bought fast fashion products due to the environmental protection properties of products. It shows that the environmental protection attribute has been effectively transformed into the actual purchase motivation of some consumers and has a significant consumer purchase intention driving force in the fast fashion consumption scene.

In the two situations, the attitude of the subjects to the two products changed significantly. The willingness of subjects to purchase Upcycle type products ($M=5.56$) was higher than that of Recycle type products ($M=5.36$). It can be seen that in addition to the perceived value of the interviewees, the interviewees generally believe that the two products have environmental protection attributes compared with ordinary fast fashion products. They believe that the environmental protection attributes of Upcycled products are significantly outperform that of Recycled products ($M_{upcycle}=6.26$, $M_{recycle}=5.93$, $P < 0.05$). They believe that Upcycle products are more unique and creative than Recycle products ($P < 0.05$).

In order to test H2, this study ran the model again, the consumer's purchase intention served as the outcome variable, and the two circular strategies (Upcycle vs. Recycle) acted as the predictor. In the above case, when the "Green" and "Emotion" in the intermediary perceived value are added, the product type failed to show a significant effect on the purchase intention ($B=-0.64$, $P=0.751$), but both perceived values emerged as significant positive predictors of purchase intention ($B_{green}=0.408$, $P < 0.01$; $B_{emotion}=0.282$, $P < 0.05$).

5. Conclusion

This study confirmed that, compared with general fast fashion, the two sustainable fast fashion products have quite significant environmental protection properties, and have a positive attitude towards sustainable fast fashion products. Consumers show a more positive attitude and willingness to buy upcycled products, because they perceive more obvious value of such products, especially in green perception and emotional perception. The results confirmed that upcycled products are more in line with the concept of consumer environmental protection than recycled products, and more unique and creative - that is, corresponding to "Green" and "Emotional" perception. There was no significant difference in other perception.

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