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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of negative reporting in the media (hereafter negative publicity) about the fast fashion industry on the attitude of (potential) consumers towards fast fashion apparels. This is done on the basis of three experimental studies. These studies also analyzed if visual and written publicity about the working conditions in the production process and environmentally related information, e.g. environmentally unfriendly externalities of the fast fashion production process, can influence the attitude towards fast fashion apparels, i.e. intention to buy, liking, attitude towards the brand. Furthermore, the studies investigated if differences between consumers (e.g. attitude towards slow fashion, fashion involvement, and ethical and environmental consciousness of consumers) significantly influence the impact of such information on consumer attitudes.

The findings of the three studies show that negative (audiovisual and written) publicity about the environmental impact and working conditions of the fast fashion industry significantly negatively influence consumers' attitudes towards the fast fashion industry. The '*power*' of negative publicity is also significantly stronger than that of positive publicity and is enhanced by the consciousness of consumers towards the social and ecological impact of the fashion industry.

Keywords: fast fashion, negative publicity, slow fashion, environmental and ethical consciousness

The Power of Negative Publicity on the Fast Fashion Industry

1. Introduction

Fashion retailers employ the contemporary term ‘fast fashion’ to depict clothing collections that are based on the newest fashion trends, but are manufactured in an inexpensive way and with lightning speed due to short production and distribution lead times. This just-in-time production movement is characterized by agile supply chains, quick response systems and spurred overconsumption (Del Rocío Bonilla, del Olmo Arriaga, & Andreu, 2019). The current overwhelming scale of fast fashion results in environmental pollution caused by mass-production and consumption. The endless exploitation of resources for ever-changing trends in fashion is immense, and the answers to these demands put enormous pressure on the environment (Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, Patsy, & Rissanen, 2020). The fast fashion industry is often characterized by poor working conditions, low wages, and short contractual periods (Preuit & Yan, 2017). Consequently, the sector has suffered from multiple crises, as demonstrated in recent tragic events such as the Bangladeshi Rana Plaza factory. Next to social externalities, also the environmental consequences of the industry are not to be underestimated e.g. fast fashion is the second largest nature polluter in the world, next to big oil (Niinimäki, et al., 2020; Quantis, 2018). Therefore, the question arises: is such a supply chain sustainable? Issues concerning corporate social responsibility are putting a lot of pressure on the industry. Hence, one might wonder whether there is a need for a transition to a slow fashion industry or will fast fashion retailers find a way to survive? In comparison to fast fashion, slow fashion takes into account how to reduce consumption, waste, threats to the environment and human health (Antanavičiūtė & Dobilaitė, 2015; Woodside & Fine, 2019). This research will analyze how consumers are dealing with *publicity* (understood as information from the media; Dean, 2004) about the social and environmental unsustainability

of fast fashion retailers. Therefore, our main research question is: Does publicity about unsustainable practices has a significant impact on consumers' attitudes towards fast fashion retailers, and, do individual differences between consumers significantly influence this relationship?

2. Literature review

2.1. Fast fashion, pre- and post purchase perceptions and satisfaction

Fast fashion customers are aware that companies from which they buy their clothing do not strive for high quality standards (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013; Sun, Cai, & Shen, 2020). Consumers often feel guilty after impulsively purchasing clothes and try to displace this feeling by raising the argument of the cheap price tag. This cheap price tag of the fast fashion business strategy brings us to a second negative consequence: the poor working conditions and the environmental consequences. Some multinationals see low-wage countries, child labor, long working days and low safety standards as an opportunity that they can exploit to gain a competitive advantage. In addition, air and water pollution, the use of toxic chemicals, ozone depletion and soil erosion of agricultural soils are also among the environmental issues of the fast fashion industry (Kim, Jung Choo, & Yoon, 2013; Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, Patsy, & Rissanen, 2020; Noh & Johnson, 2019). The general view that social and ecological issues are not taken into account by buyers of fashion items no longer holds true (Kim et al., 2013).

Increasing value is being attached to ethical factors in consumer decision-making processes (Kim et al., 2013). Ethical consumers are concerned about the consequences for the external environment that result from their purchasing decision. They try to express their values through ethical consumption

Futhermore, the literature shows that consumers are also more and more aware of the social consequences of their apparel purchases (Sun, Garrett, & Kim, 2016; Sun, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Consumers specifically seem to care about the human rights violation of labor conditions in the sweatshops (Brandão, Gadekar, & Cardoso, 2018). Shen, Wang, Lo and Shum (2012) found that consumers had a higher willingness-to-pay (WTP) for socially responsible behavior than environmentally responsible behavior, due to human right causes being perceived as more important than environmental issues. On the other hand, environmental conditions in the fashion industry also seem to be an important determinant of consumer purchase behavior (Shen et al., 2012).

Slow fashion stands in contrast to the fast fashion industry, it is part of the ‘slow movement’, a cultural transition towards quality over quantity. It aims at slowing down as well as taking off the pressure of the nowadays fast-paced life in order to reject the swiftness caused by globalization and increasing consumerism. Slow fashion is often characterized by higher materials quality and more ethical production processes. The reduction of the consumption could also reduce the amount of fashion waste (Jung & Jin, 2014).

In today’s materialistic world, consumers face the decision between fast and slow fashion when shopping for apparels. Research illustrated how eco-fashion knowledge helps consumers to act responsibly and contribute to society (Paulins & Hillery, 2009). Consumers with sufficient knowledge of the supply chain within the fashion industry are more susceptible to support as well as reward ethical manufacturing practices through their purchases (Paulins & Hillery, 2009). Companies have realized that sustainability and ethical conduct have begun to matter in the fashion industry. However, mass-produced items in the fast fashion industry are still booming and there is still a lack of demand for the slow fashion industry mainly caused by its higher prices (Jung & Jin, 2014). So, is there another way to reduce the relatively inexpensive fast fashion consumption?

2.2. Publicity and the fast fashion industry

The media, for example, are increasingly highlighting the negative effects of the fast fashion industry. Also, a Fashion Transparency Index has been established and companies are making more and more ethical alternatives available to consumers (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). It is claimed that some consumers consciously avoid fast fashion brands because of the negative social and environmental impact they have. Consumers are also more likely to punish unethical behavior of companies than to reward ethical behavior. However, there is little empirical research to corroborate these assertions.

Research shows that when consumers are confronted with negative publicity about a brand, this can damage the company's image and reputation (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Roozen & Raedts, 2017). This can lead to a decline in their market share, which also reduces the company's turnover (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Hence, this is a call for marketers to gain a better understanding of these negative relationships, to manage negative publicity and information and to prevent them by placing sustainability at the center of their marketing strategy (Colucci, Tuan, Visentin, 2020; Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Conversely, in cases where a brand is avoided, there must be a negative attitude towards the brand (Kim et al., 2012). This suggests that not consuming and or purchasing a brand (e.g. anti-consumption), is a conscious choice, and that the consumer is aware of his beliefs. In some cases, a negative attitude towards brands often based on negative emotions and experiences - antipathy - can be much more profound than simply not enjoying a certain brand or product. Therefore, brand hate or brand-antipathy can be defined as the psychological state of a consumer in which intense negative feelings are experienced in a consistent way (Kucuk, 2016).

Furthermore, Ahluwalia, Burnkrant and Unnava (2000) show that the level of involvement of a consumer in relation to a brand and or a company can play a moderating role in the processing of negative brand publicity. Consumers with a high level of commitment to a certain brand and or company start to put forward counter-arguments and try to resist behavioral change when they come into contact with negative information about this brand. Low-involvement consumers, on the other hand, are more likely to attach more weight to negative than to positive information. For consumers with a relatively low involvement in relation to the brand, the negativity effect does apply. Hence, they will not try to resist behavioral change because they perceive that negative information as accurate.

3. Research design

The added value of this research consists first and foremost of a deeper understanding of the effects of negative publicity of the fast fashion industry on consumers' attitudes and buying behavior of fast fashion. Shen et al. (2012) suggested that consumer purchase behavior with regard to ethical fashion was influenced by human right causes and to a lesser extent by environmental issues. However, until now, the influence of negative publicity about social/human rights of fast fashion workers and environmental problems caused by the fast fashion industry has up to our knowledge not been empirically analyzed. A second important contribution of our research lies in the publicity material we used in our experiments: the publicity 'texts' in the form of videos and news paper articles were not fictitious. Hence, our study is based on externally valid material. Third, we analyzed whether the impact of negative publicity on consumers' attitudes and purchasing intentions varies according to specific consumer characteristics (e.g., slow fashion knowledge, consciousness).

Based on previous research findings, we put forward the following two hypotheses: (H1) 'Negative publicity about the working conditions and or the environment, e.g. social and

environmental externalities, caused by the fast fashion production process, significantly influences consumers' attitudes towards the fast fashion industry and their apparels' and (H2) 'Individual differences between consumers significantly influence the relationship between publicity and attitudes'.

To test the hypotheses we carried out three experimental studies. In the first two studies we focused on negative audiovisual publicity about the working conditions and about the environment of the fast fashion industry. In Study 3 we compared the effects of positive and negative written/printed publicity about the working conditions and environmental impact of the fast fashion industry on consumers' attitudes towards fast fashion apparels. Furthermore, in all studies we have taken individual differences into account to test the second hypothesis. In Study 1 we focused on different characteristics of slow fashion consumers. In Study 2 and Study 3, the influence of consumers' social- and environmentally consciousness and their fashion involvement were taken into account.

In all three studies we opted for a before-after design setting to measure the changes in attitudes and behavioral intentions of our participants after having read (visual/written) publicity. In Figure 1 an overview of the before-after design of the study is presented.

{Please, insert Figure 1 about here}

4. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to investigate the effects of social and or environmental externalities on consumers' attitudes and buying behaviors within the fast fashion industry (H1). Furthermore, we examined if consumers with a relative high score on the 'consumer orientation to slow fashion scale' (Jung & Jin, 2014) react differently towards negative

(audiovisual) publicity about the fast fashion industry, compared to consumers who are less oriented towards slow fashion (H2).

We decided to set up an experiment where participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In both conditions participants were shown a video of approximately 1 minute showing the negative externalities of fast fashion. In the first condition, the video dealt with the unethical working conditions in the fast fashion industry. In the second condition, the video highlighted the negative environmental impacts of fast fashion.

4.1. Measurement

The first page of the questionnaire contained general information about the purpose of the study. We also informed our participants that they could decide not to participate in the study, that they could end their participation at any time, and that their answers were anonymous. According to our university's IRB charter, no IRB clearance was needed. On the second page, we asked them to indicate how often they buy apparels (clothing and accessories) from fast fashion brands (e.g. Zara, H&M, Primark). We also asked if they were loyal to these shops, and if they liked these shops in general. On the following page, we presented our participants the 15 items of the five-dimensional 'slow fashion scale' of Jung and Jin (2014). Furthermore, we added an extra 'factor' measuring the price-quality relationship of the clothes, i.e. a 3-item 7-point Likert scale based on Lichtenstein et al. (1993).

Next, we asked our participants to watch a one-minute video which was inserted in our online questionnaire. Depending on the experimental condition, participants either saw a video about the environmental disruption caused by the fashion industry (experimental group 1) or a video about the social welfare of fast fashion workers (experimental group 2). After they had watched the video, we asked our participants if the video was appealing to them, if they would skip this video, and if they disliked the video. All statements were rated on a 7-point

Likert scale. In order to measure participants' attitude change towards the fast fashion industry after being exposed to negative publicity (video), we asked them about their intentions to buy products of the fast fashion industry and their loyalty to these brands. We also measured brand likeability. Finally, we asked participants about their gender and age.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Sample

The data were collected through an online survey. We posted the survey link on the social media platforms Facebook and LinkedIn. In total, 206 people started the online questionnaire; 119 of whom (54.2% were men) indicated that they bought fast fashion apparels at least once a year. Only this last group of participants were included in our data analysis. The age of our participants ranged between 20-52 years ($M = 29.51$, $SD = 4.48$). 45% of the participants saw the video about the environmental impact of the fast fashion industry, 55% saw the video about the unethical working conditions. Both experimental groups found the video equally appealing ($t(118) = .59$, $p = .55$), and had comparable scores for skipping the video ($t(118) = 1.77$, $p = .08$) and disliking the video ($t(118) = .33$, $p = .74$). Also, no significant differences were found for gender and age between both experimental groups ($\chi^2_{\text{gender}}(1) = .06$, $p = .94$; $t_{\text{age}}(116) = .52$, $p = .60$).

4.2.2. Findings

Before testing our hypotheses, we run a factor analysis to see how many factors would emerge from our combined scale based on the 15 items of Jung and Jin's (2014) 'slow fashion scale' and the 3 items of Lichtenstein et al.'s (1993) scale measuring the quality-price relationship of fashion articles. An explorative factor analyses with Varimax rotation showed

that we could indicate the same factors as Jung and Jin (2014) and Lichtenstein et al. (1993), which suggests that the ‘slow fashion scale’ could be extended with an extra factor (total variance explained 74.672%).

To test the first hypothesis, we measured the impact of being exposed to negative publicity about the fast fashion production process. We used a two-way mixed design, where the topic of the video was the between-subject factor and time point (before seeing the video versus after seeing the video) the within-subject factor. We found no significant differences between the two experimental conditions, i.e. unethical working conditions and negative externalities of fast fashion industry on the environment. However, the scores on all dependent variables were significantly lower after seeing the video: intention to buy at a fast fashion shop ($F_{\text{buy}}(1, 89) = 43.722; p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .447$), liking the clothes of a fast fashion shop ($F_{\text{like}}(1, 89) = 123.696; p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .696$), and the intention to stay loyal to the fast fashion industry ($F_{\text{loyal}}(1, 89) = 23.930; p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .307$). In Figure 2 an overview of the significant findings is presented.

{Please, insert Figure 2 about here}

Figure 2 shows that the (negative) impact of negative publicity on ‘brand likeability’ is the highest (reduction of 27.8%), followed by buying intentions (-19.9%) and brand loyalty (-14.0%). Therefore, we can accept the first hypothesis.

Next, we investigated if the impact of negative publicity about fast fashion varies according to consumers’ orientation towards slow fashion. Using K-means cluster analyses we classified our participants into two groups based on their scores on the 18 items measuring ‘orientation towards slow fashion’: 57.1% of the participants were labeled as ‘(potential) slow fashion buyers’ and 42.9% as ‘fast fashion buyers’. We found no significant differences between slow

and fast fashion buyers regarding their attitudes towards buying fast fashion apparels, fast fashion brands liking and loyalty towards the fast fashion industry. These results suggest that we cannot accept H2. Therefore, we can conclude that negative publicity about fast fashion significantly lowers consumers' purchase intentions, their liking of and loyalty towards fast fashion brands, irrespective of their orientation towards slow fashion.

5. Study 2

In Study 2 we used the same before-after experimental design setting and the same videos as in Study 1. However, we focused on two other customer characteristics: 'fashion involvement' and 'socially and ecologically conscious consumer behavior'. To measure 'fashion involvement' we asked participants to evaluate a 7-point 3-item Likert scale based on Tigert, Ring and King (1976): '*I read the fashion news regularly*', '*I try to keep my wardrobe up-to-date with fashion trends*', and '*I like to shop for clothes*'. Our scale to measure 'socially and ecologically conscious consumer behavior' is based on the research of Sudbury-Riley and Kohlbacher (2015). Their ethically minded consumer behavior scale (EMCB) assesses both social and ecological issues: 'socially conscious consumer behavior' (SCCB) and 'ecologically conscious consumer behavior' (ECCB). Furthermore, we asked our participants how often they buy at fast fashion retailers. We also measured their brand satisfaction, brand loyalty and their willingness to recommend the brand to others.

5.1. Results

5.1.1. Sample

In this study, too, we used a convenience sample. The data were collected through an online survey on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn). On the first page of the questionnaire,

participants were given information about the topic of the study. We also informed them that their participation was anonymous and voluntary, and that they could stop their participation at any time. In total, 95 participants (64.2% were women) completed the questionnaire and indicated that they were buying fast fashion apparels. The age of the participants ranged between 18-54 years ($M = 25.01$; $SD = 5.47$). 46.3% of the participants saw the video about the unethical working conditions of the fast fashion industry and 53.7% the video about environmental damage. No significant differences were found for gender and age between both experimental groups ($\chi^2_{\text{gender}}(1) = 1.949$, $p = .163$; $t_{\text{age}}(94) = .357$, $p = .722$).

5.1.2. Findings

The findings of Study 2 are similar to those of Study 1. For all the dependent variables (i.e. buying intentions, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, and brand recommendation willingness) we found a significant decrease in scores after watching the video compared to participants' baseline scores. Therefore, H1 was accepted.

Next, we investigated whether individual consumer characteristics (H2), more specifically 'fashion involvement' and 'social- and ecological conscious consumer behavior', significantly influence the before-after measurements. Based on reliability analyses and factor analyses we decided to construct the concepts 'fashion involvement' ($\alpha = .768$, 68.61% explained variance); 'socially conscious consumer behavior' (SCCB, $\alpha = .904$; 79.148% explained variance) and 'ecologically conscious consumer behavior' (ECCB, $\alpha = .925$; 81.685% explained variance).

We found no significant interaction effects between experimental condition and participants' fashion involvement for the different dependent variables. Furthermore, we investigated if ethically minded consumers responded differently to the negative publicity video. Participants with relatively low scores on SCCB and ECCB (median split for both scales at 4.25 on 7) had

significantly higher scores on buying fast fashion intentions, fast fashion brand satisfaction, fast fashion brand loyalty and willingness to recommend fast fashion apparels, compared to participants with relatively high scores on SCCB and ECCB. We also found a significant difference in the before-after measurements for the two different groups (low and high scores on SCCB and ECCB). In Figure 3 the before-after measurements are presented ($(F_{\text{buy}}(1, 86) = 7.638; p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .082)$; $(F_{\text{satisfaction}}(1, 86) = 5.369; p = .023, \eta_p^2 = .059)$; $(F_{\text{loyalty}}(1, 86) = 5.304; p = .024, \eta_p^2 = .058)$; $(F_{\text{recommend}}(1, 86) = 7.386; p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .079)$).

{Please, insert Figure 3 about here}

Figure 3 shows that the effect of the negative publicity video is significantly higher on consumers with relatively high scores on social and ecological consciousness behavior (S/E CCB), compared to consumers with relatively low scores. The buying intentions of the high ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers decreases with 29.3%, whilst for the low ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers the decrease is only 20.7%. For ‘satisfaction’ we also see a significantly higher decrease for the high ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers’ (-48.4%) compared to the relatively low ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers (-39.4%). The decreases (in absolute values) are highest for fast fashion brand loyalty and intention to recommend fast fashion apparels: high ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers’ -57.8% and low ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers -39.9% (loyalty); high ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers’ -70.3% and low ‘*E/S-CCB*’ consumers -55.6% (intentions to recommend). Based on these results we can accept H2.

6. Study 3

In the third study we compared the impact of negative and positive publicity. Video material (of one minute) on positive ecological issues or ethical working conditions of the fast fashion industry is rare. Therefore, we decided to use printed (written) publicity. First, a content

analyses was carried out to collect (positive and negative) publicity about environmental issues and unethical working conditions of the fast fashion industry. Afterwards, the selected texts were pretested.

6.1. *Content analysis*

We decided to use non-fictitious and non manipulated news articles. The articles were all published in 2017 or 2018 on the Dutch version of the Belgian Google News site. We used systematic search queries to identify relevant articles for our experiment. In the first phase of our search, we entered brand names of fast fashion industry companies and the search terms ‘environment’ or ‘working conditions’ in the search bar. Next, we skimmed the headlines of the news articles in the search results list. Based on the headline, we decided whether or not to click through to the news article. Then, we read the article and decided whether it was useful or not for our research. For three brands (H&M, Zara, and Primark), our search yielded 12 news articles with either positive or negative information on an environmental topic or the working conditions in the fast fashion factories. We decided to test all these news items (N = 36) in a pre-test.

6.2. *Pre-test*

We presented the 36 news articles to 24 students from an urban university in Belgium. They rated how positive the news about the company was on a scale from 0 (very negative news) to 100 (very positive news). The total average scores for the different news items differed significantly ($p < .001$). However, for Primark and H&M the gap between the scores for the positive and negative news items for environment and working conditions were significantly bigger than for Zara. Based on these results we opted to select Primark and H&M for our

experimental study. Furthermore, we selected the news items with the lowest (negative publicity) and highest (positive publicity) scores for both brands.

6.3. Research design

Using a 2 x 2 between-subjects design, we analyzed the influence of the news item topic (environmental impact versus working conditions) and the valence of the brand publicity (positive versus negative) on participants' buying intentions and their attitudes towards the brand. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the questionnaires of the two fast fashion brands (Primark or H&M). Before they read the news article, participants were asked to indicate how often they buy apparels at Primark or H&M. Furthermore, we asked them if they like the brand, if they would recommend the brand, and if they have positive feelings towards the brand. All items were measured on a 10-point-scale. Next, we measured 'brand antipathy' based on Kucuk's scale (2016). Subsequently, 'general involvement in fashion' was assessed using the fashion involvement scale of Tigert et al. (1976). Then, we asked our participants to read the news article. In order to detect shifts in the scores on our dependent variables, we remeasured participants' buying intentions, brand likeability, brand attitude, willingness to recommend Primark/H&M, and their brand-antipathy after they had read the news article. Finally, participants completed the ethically minded consumer behavior scale (EMCB) of Sudbury-Riley and Kohlbacher (2015). At the end of the questionnaire we asked participants' age and gender.

6.4. Results

6.4.1. Sample

In this study, we also used a convenience sample. Participants were recruited from a market research panel built by the first author. Participants were invited by e-mail to take part in the

study. The e-mail contained an anonymous hyperlink to the online questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire contained information on the survey and informed participants that their participation was anonymous and voluntary. In total 286 respondents (74.5% were women) completed the questionnaire and indicated that they shop for fast fashion products. Their ages ranged from 17 to 81 years ($M = 30.99$; $SD = 13.12$). 51.05% of the sample ($n = 146$) read a news article on an environment-related topic (52.1% of these participants read an article with negative information and 47.9% of the 146 participants read an article with positive information). 48.95% ($n = 140$) participants read an article on the working conditions in the brand's factory. In 50.7% of the cases the news items contained negative information, and in 49.3% of the information the valence of the news article was positive.

6.4.2. Findings

The news item topic (working conditions versus environmental impact) had no effect on readers' attitudes and buying intentions. We also found no significant interaction effects between the fashion brands for the dependent variables, which suggests that the brand names H&M and Primark did not interfere with our results. We did, however, find a significant shift in the buying intentions and attitudes scores of participants who had read a news article with *negative* publicity. We did not find a significant shift in buying intentions and brand attitude scores between both measure points for participants in the positive publicity condition. Buying intentions and attitudes significantly decreased after reading the negative publicity ($n = 136$); however, they did not significantly increase after reading positive publicity ($n = 127$). The results of the within-subjects contrasts of the repeated ANOVA show a significantly lower score after reading the negative news items for the all variables: brand liking -22.1% ($F_{\text{liking}}(1, 135) = 35.608$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .209$), intention to recommend -29.9% ($F_{\text{recommend}}(1, 135) = 57.504$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .299$), brand satisfaction -22.8% ($F_{\text{satisfaction}}(1, 135) = 46.909$; p

$<.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .258$), and buying intentions -23.4% ($F_{\text{intention to buy}}(1, 135) = 12.918$; $p <.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .087$). On the other hand, the degree of antipathy towards the brand significantly increased after reading the negative publicity news items: +27.1% ($F_{\text{antipathy}}(1, 135) = 63.583$; $p <.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .320$). However, for the positive news items only a (small) significant difference within the subjects was found for the intention to recommend the brand (increased with 9.51%; $F(1, 126) = 4.477$; $p = .036$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$). Based on these findings we can accept H1. In Figure 4 the before-after measurements are visualized.

{Please, insert Figure 4 about here}

As in Study 2, the findings of Study 3 show that fashion involvement does not significantly influence the decrease in consumers' buying intentions and attitudes. Furthermore, consumers' scores on the ethically minded consumer behavior (EMCB) scale do significantly influence the outcomes, i.e. consumers with a high score on EMCB 'the relatively high *E/S-CCB*' consumers' react significantly differently for brand liking ($F_{\text{liking}}(1, 269) = 4.159$; $p = .042$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$), intention to recommend the brand to others ($F_{\text{recommend}}(1, 269) = 6.173$; $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .023$), brand satisfaction ($F_{\text{satisfaction}}(1, 269) = 4.229$; $p = .041$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$), buying intentions ($F_{\text{buy}}(1, 269) = 2.348$; $p = .0127$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$), and brand antipathy ($F_{\text{antipathy}}(1, 269) = 5.565$; $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$) after reading positive and or negative news items compared to the relatively low '*E/S-CCB*' consumers'. In Table 1 an overview of the average scores on the different constructs before and after reading the (negative/positive) news item (publicity) is presented.

{Please, insert Table 1 about here}

The results in Table 1 show that the average scores for the different constructs (brand liking, intention to recommend the brand, brand satisfaction and buying intentions) are relatively higher before and after the experiment for consumers with a significantly lower score on the EMCB scale compared to consumers with a higher score on the EMCB scale. Therefore, we can accept H2. Also, after reading negative publicity about the fast fashion company, the scores of consumers with a relatively high EMCB decrease significantly more than those of the other consumers. However, changes for the dependent variables after reading positive publicity are relatively higher for the low score EMCB consumers (see Table 2). It is noteworthy that in this ‘information condition’ the average scores for the high score EMCB consumers are still ‘lower’ in absolute value than for the low EMCB consumers.

{Please, insert Table 2 about here}

Table 2 emphasizes that the influence of negative publicity is significantly larger than that of positive publicity for the different outcome variables.

7. Conclusion and discussion

Fast fashion is still booming and playing a leading role in the fashion industry. As one of the biggest industries affecting people’s daily life, the fast fashion industry serves a large number of customers. When we think about the environmental, economic and social impacts of fast fashion, we realize that it is a complex industry which operates a vast and dynamic system linked to many other industries in the world (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Quantis, 2018). The aim of this study was, therefore, to investigate if publicity about the environmental and social externalities caused by fast fashion production processes, significantly influences consumer’s attitudes towards the fast fashion industry, in particular their brand liking, intentions to

recommend the brand to others, their brand loyalty, brand satisfaction, and buying intentions. Moreover, we analyzed if individual differences, i.e. consumers' attitude towards slow fashion, their fashion involvement and social and ecological consciousness, significantly influence the relationship between exposure to negative brand publicity on the one hand and attitude changes towards the fast fashion industry on the other hand.

Overall, the findings of the three studies indicate the significant '*power*' of negative publicity on consumers' attitude towards the fast fashion industry. Based on these findings, we can accept the first hypothesis. Our findings indicate the importance of (negative) publicity for the fast fashion industry. Audiovisual and written negative publicity has a significant negative influence on the different attitude measurement scales towards the fast fashion industry. However, we did not find significant differences between negative (and positive) publicity about the environment, on the one hand, and working conditions in the fast fashion industry on the other. Therefore, the argument that consumers purchase behavior is more influenced by human right aspects and to a lesser extent by environmental issues (Shen et al., 2012) cannot be confirmed by our studies. However, Study 2 and Study 3 show that consumers who are more conscious about the environmental impact of the fast fashion industry and its exploitative working conditions (high E/S-conscious consumers) have significantly lower attitudes towards the fast fashion industry. The 'before information exposure' measurements show that their scores on brand liking, intention to recommend the brand, brand loyalty, and buying intentions are significantly lower compared to low E/S-conscious consumers. In contrast, their antipathy towards fast fashion brands is significantly higher compared to low E/S-conscious consumers. After being confronted with negative publicity high E/S-conscious consumers also experience a significant larger decline in their attitudes towards the fashion industry compared to low E/S-conscious consumers. Positive publicity in written news items, on the other hand, shows the opposite. The fast fashion attitude scores of high E/S-conscious

consumers increase significantly more than the attitude scores of low E/S-conscious consumers. However, the before and after measurement scores (in absolute values) for the high E/S-conscious consumers are still below the scores of relative low E/S-conscious consumers. Based on these findings, we can accept our second hypothesis: individual consumers characteristics (e.g. E/S consciousness) moderate the impact of (negative) publicity on consumers' attitudes towards the fast fashion industry and their buying intentions. Our results corroborate previous findings (Sun et al., 2014, 2016). Moreover, the findings of Study 3 indicate that compared to exposure to positive brand publicity, attitudinal changes are significantly larger after exposure to negative brand publicity. This finding confirms the assumption that more weight is assigned to negative than to positive information, also called the 'negativity effect'. However, Ahluwalia et al. (2000) nuance this negativity effect. They show that issue involvement can play a moderating role in the processing of negative information. Our results confirm the findings of Ahluwalia et al. (2000) as we also find that consumers who are highly involved, i.e. relatively high E/S-conscious consumers, react more strongly to information about the environmental impact and bad working conditions of the fast fashion industry's production processes. Their stronger a priori views seem to limit the impact of counter-arguments or new information as a consequence of which these consumers react significantly more negatively compared to consumers who are less E/S conscious.

8. Managerial and Societal implications

The research results from our three studies contribute to deepening the understanding of the power of negative publicity (audiovisual and printed information) about ecological and social externalities of the fast fashion industry. Contrary to most experimental studies, the research design of the three studies was based on externally *valid* publicity material, i.e. the impact of

real (non- fictitious) publicity about the fast fashion industry was tested. We also used existing brand names and, therefore, we were able to measure the attitude towards the brand in a more externally valid setting. This suggests that our results are pertinent to real life situations and that the industry should consider them seriously. In particular, our results indicate how damaging negative publicity can be for the image of fast fashion and how difficult it is to ‘recover’ through positive publicity. Furthermore, our empirical research results show that negative environmental and social publicity has a serious impact on consumers’ attitudes towards fast fashion brands and that this is not significantly different between social and environmental considerations. This means that the management of the fast fashion industry should not distinguish between these and take both seriously.

9. Limitations

Despite the strength of the research results, there are limitations which leave valuable areas of research for future studies. First, the studies are all based on onetime survey research. To tackle the differences between customers, we have controlled for their ‘before attitude’ measures. However, dynamic measurement methods are recommended for measuring attitude change. Furthermore, next to attitude measurements, slow fashion and the ecological and social consciousness of customers, other related concepts such as the ethical- and ecological consumption of the participants, and their general attitude towards publicity could also be taken into account. Finally, we investigated publicity (Dean, 2004) in established media (newspapers, television, radio), but it would be interesting to extend the research to the related concept of word-of-mouth (WOM) which plays an increasing role through social media platforms. Therefore, further research should measure the impact of negative and positive publicity about the fast fashion industry on different social media platforms. In these studies, the credibility of the news source and/or trustworthiness of the publicity should be taken into

consideration given the importance of this moderating variable in the literature (Roozen & Raedts, 2017).

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