

Research on Psychological Motivation of Social Aesthetics and Group Norms Guiding Sustainable Apparel Consumption Choices

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Abstract: The textile industry is advancing green transformation across the board, and sustainable apparel has stepped out of niche markets and gained public popularity. Consumer behavior is shaped by external economic factors and consumers' inner psychology. Based on the *Theory of Planned Behavior*, this paper analyzes the internal psychological mechanisms of social aesthetics and group norms affecting sustainable clothing consumption. The sustainable fashion sector in China maintains sound development. In the consumption scenario, the aesthetic orientation of the public and the behavioral norms of social communities have become important factors affecting clothing purchase decisions. These two sets of norms jointly govern consumers' purchasing behavior. Identity expression, environmental moral cognition and social value perception together form a psychological link between external factors and individual consumption. This paper clarifies the working mechanisms of the above two factors, and the conclusions offer practical guidance for sustainable apparel brand design and community management. This study does not carry out cross-sectional analysis based on social identity theory. Further empirical research is needed to verify the mediating and moderating effects of these psychological variables.

Keywords: Sustainable apparel consumption; social aesthetics; group norms; psychological motivation; social identity.

1. Introduction

Textile and clothing are fundamental livelihood industries worldwide, and the whole industrial chain faces severe environmental pressures. According to monitoring data from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the textile industry produces 92 million metric tons of waste annually, with greenhouse gas and marine microplastic emissions ranking among the top in the light industry. Fast fashion has fostered a culture of disposable apparel use, which has intensified environmental pressures across the textile industry. Rising public environmental awareness has also transformed consumer preferences for clothing. In 2025, the sustainable apparel market hit 132.7 billion yuan, with an annual growth rate of 18.4%. This figure far outpaces the 9.2% average growth of the traditional clothing sector.

Sustainable apparel now covers more than basic ready-to-wear items. Accessories and home textile products have expanded its product scope, driving overall market maturity.

Changes have taken place in domestic consumption patterns, with young people forming the main consumer group. When selecting clothes, shoppers no longer focus merely on appearance. Ideas of green and healthy lifestyles have reshaped people's daily dressing choices.

Most existing studies discuss sustainable apparel consumption from pricing, personal environmental awareness and policy perspectives, while rarely exploring its intrinsic psychological mechanisms. Social aesthetics can form a unified standard and value orientation for clothing evaluation, shaping the public's perception of fashion [1]. Group norms rely on social communities to form fixed behavioral norms, effectively constraining and guiding individual consumption behavior. Apparel's social attributes have become prominent, and fashion trends spread rapidly across short video platforms. Various social communities have expanded, and aesthetics and group norms exert a noticeable influence on consumer

choices.

Combining industry status, literature and research data, this paper explores the psychological drivers of sustainable apparel consumption from three perspectives, providing theoretical and practical support for the refined operation of the apparel industry.

2. Social Aesthetic Transformation: Value Reconstruction from Fast Fashion to Sustainable Aesthetics

Our prior research has explored how aesthetic preferences and group norms influence consumer behavior in sustainable apparel consumption. Shifts in mainstream social aesthetics have further driven value transformation within the clothing consumption sector, guiding the industry to transition from fast fashion to a new aesthetic system centered on sustainability.

For over a decade, fast fashion has dominated the consumer market with its frequent style updates and affordable prices, effectively cutting people's spending on clothes. However, this business model has brought about undesirable consumption habits. Many consumers buy new clothes on a regular basis and dispose of them after a short period of wear. Most shoppers only focus on the visual design of clothes and ignore the quality of fabric and environmental protection, thus contributing to the world's overconsumption of clothing. According to the data released by the United Nations Environment Programme, the average length of use for clothing has dropped by 36% globally as a result of fast fashion [2]. Research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation has also found the same. World-class clothing production has doubled since 2000-2015, but the frequency of wearing each piece of clothing has fallen by 36%. A considerable number of fast-fashion clothes are thrown away after only a few times.

Chinese consumers have changed their sense of wearing

clothes, and environmentally friendly apparel is now also relatively popular. With a rise in the standard of living, fewer people are driven by the pursuit of fashion. They are now judging the clothes in several ways. Fabric safety, craftsmanship, durability and environmental performance are all now required for selection. A survey of the China National Textile and Apparel Council has shown the same results. Consumers of all ages and in all parts of China are looking for eco-friendly clothes that are timeless, practical and long-lasting. Residents and young people in first-tier cities are more likely to wear environmentally friendly clothing and are in the process of doing so.

Changes in the Market Environment have also given rise to new Designs of clothes. Simple and natural styles are now popular, and it has no longer been thought that eco-friendly clothing is plain. Many Chinese clothing companies have adjusted to changes in the market and incorporated concepts of sustainable development into design and materials. Instead of promoting through environmental slogans, these brands create products that can be worn in daily life and integrate sustainable living into people's lives casually.

A Shift in the sense of aesthetics and consumption ideas has occurred among the public. Synthetic fabrics have lost some popularity, and now natural fibres and recycled eco-materials are becoming more popular. There are too many new fashionable items now, and fewer people are keeping up. Now, a few simple, practical and classic styles are very popular. Unregulated accumulation of clothes has been reduced to a certain extent, and now the market favours rational consumption. Nowadays, people choose environmentally friendly clothes because they are concerned about the environment and also because they like the style of wearing them and the life they want to lead.

Due to changing consumer demands, all areas of the clothing industry have been changing and developing. No longer pursuing short-lived fashion trends blindly. Therefore, they strive to balance the two when selecting design and materials. Sustainability is no longer limited to marketing; it has also begun to cover all aspects of a company's long-term development [3]. Good collaboration between public aesthetics and brand design has helped sustainable clothing move out of the niche market. Gradually, a new type of consumption that is both beautiful and environmentally friendly has begun to emerge.

3. The Social Influence Mechanism of Group Norms: Dual Drive of Identification Needs and Conformity Psychology

Social Aesthetics refer to the fundamental values in people's choices of public attire. Behavioral Rules for Individuals' Consumption Decisions Vary Among Different Social Groups. Many studies of consumer behaviour have used the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and social norms often refer to the public's attitudes towards green consumption [4]. Apparel is a type of visibly worn consumer product, and the influence of group norms on their consumption behavior is particularly prominent. Group norms mainly rely on subjective expectations, identity recognition, and group imitation to influence consumer behavior.

The views of relatives and peers affect personal preferences, and group tendencies directly guide individual dressing decisions. In the new media era, fashion influencers boast far

greater reach than traditional advertisements. The dissemination and coverage of such content far exceed traditional commercial advertising.

Online fashion communities and offline interest groups have flourished, and group views exert a growing influence on individual dressing choices.

Dressing topics have become a common topic in daily social interactions, and unified aesthetic standards within social groups guide individual judgments. High-frequency social interactions consolidate group consensus and strengthen the binding force of group norms on apparel selection.

Online and offline social networks are interconnected, accelerating the spread of group views, and clothing and consumption preferences are gradually converging. Clothing, as an external form of expression, is also an important carrier for individuals to convey their identity to the outside world. According to social identity theory, people actively belong to different groups, and sustainable clothing has now become a cultural symbol for communities to convey ideas and positions [5]. Many consumers use this to meet like-minded partners and strengthen their self-identity. The youth group has more social activities and close social connections, and these psychological characteristics are most prominent in this group.

Influenced by the visibility feature of clothing, the public often refers to the dressing styles of peers and the workplace community. This kind of imitative behavior is not blindly following the crowd, but a natural way for individuals to fit into social groups. Different social groups will form their own unique dressing styles and consumption orientations, and they learn from one another. Interpersonal communication accelerates trend diffusion and strengthens the binding force of group norms on consumption.

Due to factors such as education level, region, and gender, different consumer groups have varying sensitivities to group norms, while overall consumption trends remain consistent. People, driven by their social and identity recognition needs, use group norms to translate macro aesthetic concepts into concrete consumer behavior.

4. Identity Expression and Social Identity: The Self-presentation Function of Sustainable Apparel Consumption

Relying on social aesthetics and social norms, clothing has become a carrier for people to shape their image and convey their personal identity. According to Irving Goffman's *Theory of Self-Presentation*, people express their life philosophy through consumption choices. Clothing, as a high-frequency worn product, boast prominent self-expressive features.

Contemporary consumers increasingly value the spiritual connotations behind their clothing, especially young people who are accustomed to using clothing to convey their personal attitudes and value pursuits.

Dressing has become an important social medium both online and offline, as people use clothing to form different interest communities and shape their personal image. As a result, the self-expression attributes of clothing have become increasingly prominent. It has gone beyond basic dressing needs and become an important channel for people to express values and bond with like-minded peers.

Consumers' choice of environmentally friendly fabrics and long-lasting designs for clothing is a direct manifestation of conveying the concept of ecological protection and practicing rational consumption orientation. Multiple research results indicate that choosing sustainable clothing is a common way for the public to convey environmental protection concepts and demonstrate social responsibility [6]. Surveys on consumers in first-tier cities show that value expression ranks second only to product quality and comfort as a major factor in consumers' choice of sustainable apparel. The evolution of consumer attitudes has also given rise to new lifestyles.

When consumers make clothing choices, they will unconsciously align with mainstream values in their social groups, in order to build connections with like-minded peers. This psychological characteristic reinforces the identity attribute of clothing and promotes the integration of sustainable concepts into daily social expression.

Currently, lifestyle concepts such as slow fashion, minimalism, and zero waste continue to be popular and deeply linked to sustainable clothing consumption [7]. Consumers who identify with this type of lifestyle philosophy will prioritize choosing clothing that fits their personal lifestyle. Short videos and graphic platforms have become the main force for spreading ideas, and the sharing of content by ordinary users promotes the deep integration of fashion styles and lifestyle concepts.

With a sense of community, the people are more likely to practice green consumption habits. Most people in the sustainable fashion community are more reasonable consumers and tend to choose environmentally friendly clothes.

With the blending of self-expression and group identity, sustainable fashion has moved away from the format of traditional clothes and now constitutes a new form of culture for the people's desire for spiritual freedom. Therefore, the scope of application for this is relatively narrow.

5. Mediating Variables of Psychological Motivation: Moderating Effect of Perceived Value and Risk Perception

External Appearance and Group Standards Do Not Drive Consumer End-Use Selection. Therefore, the consumers themselves will decide on the purchase after making their own assessments. The two types of mediators connecting consumer behaviour to the external environment are perceived value and risk perception. Change in the trend of shopping behaviour among the public.

Perceived value is the core dimension for analyzing consumer motivation, referring to consumers' subjective judgment of the comprehensive value of a product, including three major levels: functionality, emotion, and society. The basic usage attributes of clothing constitute the functional value subject, and fabric safety, comfortable wearing, and durability are the basic criteria for the public to judge products. The current mainstream sustainable clothing mostly uses natural or recycled fabrics, with solid workmanship and practical value widely recognized by the market. The psychological satisfaction brought by choosing environmentally friendly clothing can enhance the willingness to repurchase [8]. When dressing in line with mainstream aesthetics and social consensus, individuals are more likely to gain social recognition, which is also a key

aspect of perceived value. With the advantage of concept and quality, most consumers can accept the price premium of such products. There are differences in the evaluation criteria for product value among social communities. Consumers who deeply cultivate sustainable communities place greater emphasis on conceptual values; The general public still prioritizes product practicality and cost-effectiveness.

Various consumer concerns can also constrain purchasing behavior. The negative perception of sustainable clothing among the public mainly focuses on three dimensions: style, price, and social interaction. Some consumers hold the stereotype that many eco-friendly styles lack diversity and fail to keep up with mainstream trends. These types of products are generally priced higher than regular fast fashion items, and the high price barrier reduces ordinary consumers' willingness to buy. Some consumers are also concerned that choosing eco-friendly clothing may be misunderstood by others and cause social awkwardness.

Consumers will make choices based on their own judgment and ultimately determine their intention to purchase. When the comprehensive value is higher than the potential risk, consumers' purchasing intention rises, otherwise they will refuse to buy. Consumers of all ages and backgrounds have different selections for clothes [9]. Young people are more willing to take risks and are concerned about the emotional and social functions of clothing. Middle-aged consumers are generally more reasonable and consider both functionality and living expenses when choosing. Social aesthetics and group atmospheres have changed in recent years; now, fewer people are concerned about consumption and more people have started wearing green clothes.

6. Collaborative Guidance of Social Aesthetics and Group Norms: Promotion Path for Sustainable Consumption Behavior

Previous studies have separately explored the impact logic of aesthetics and group norms, as well as their corresponding individual psychological characteristics. In real consumer scenarios, the two rarely play an independent role and usually merge together to influence purchasing behavior, promoting sustainable clothing to gradually enter the mass market [10].

Scene fusion is the core path for achieving synergy between the two. Sustainable fashion exhibitions and environmental fashion themed exhibitions held in many domestic places mostly focus on the application of recycled fabrics and low-carbon style designs, creating a unified aesthetic atmosphere in public spaces. The on-site crowd spontaneously formed a temporary community, and participants gradually form exclusive codes of conduct. Aesthetic atmosphere combined with group consensus guides people to adjust their cognition and consumption decisions. This type of offline activity has two major values: aesthetic dissemination and gathering group consensus.

Online fashion bloggers and industry creators have become important carriers for the linkage between the two. The creators of platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu convey the aesthetic connotation of sustainable clothing through clothing display and product evaluation, and form a unified code of conduct relying on fan groups. This type of content combines aesthetic output and behavioral guidance, has a long-term impact on ordinary consumers, and is also the core force of promoting sustainable fashion online,

continuously narrowing the internal connection between aesthetic orientation and group norms.

The combination of online check-in and offline landing activities has also become an effective form of synergy between the two. Online fashion check-in challenges, interest communities, offline pop-ups and environmental activities in commercial zones build exclusive thematic atmospheres that arouse public aesthetic preferences immediately, the public's aesthetic preferences are quickly awakened, and group behavior norms are clearer, making it easier to stimulate immediate consumption intentions.

Such offline activities encourage user-generated content and extend the reach of sustainable fashion ideas, continue to radiate more potential consumers, and help aesthetic orientation and group norms have a long-term impact on the market [11].

Individual behavioral traits determine the effectiveness of group dynamics. Consumers with solid environmental adaptability are subject to the combined influence of aesthetic tendencies and group norms. To cultivate lasting green consumption habits, scholars need to create a coherent system for sustainable aesthetics. Additionally, positive group norms can be promoted throughout social communities and public spaces, so aesthetic guidance and behavioral standards blend organically and act as a cohesive unit.

7. Conclusion

Based on industry data, psychological theories and field surveys, the paper examines how aesthetics and group norms influence sustainable apparel consumption. Aesthetic orientation, group constraints, identity expression as well as value and risk judgment build a multi-layered influence system that acts on consumers' external behaviors and internal psychology.

Modern dressing styles move past the monotonous designs of fast fashion, and eco-friendliness, durability and simplicity represent mainstream characteristics. Selecting sustainable apparel is no longer a moral choice tied to public welfare but an independent decision guided by personal preferences. Group norms rely on psychological mechanisms including social identity and group imitation to convert macro-level concepts into individual consumption behaviors. Identity expressed through clothing supports stable green consumption, and perceived value together with risk perception determines the outcome of each purchase. When these factors interact, the guiding effect on mass consumption will be significantly improved. Online platforms, offline activities, and industry creators are the main channels for communication, and young people and urban residents are the most sensitive to related changes and are also the core consumer groups.

This study enriches the application of social psychology in the field of sustainable clothing, and the relevant conclusions can guide brand design and community refinement operations. As offline fashion communities and offline fashion exhibitions become increasingly popular, there are significant differences in the psychological characteristics of consumers in different social communities, which also confirms the mechanism proposed in this article. Developing operational plans for different social communities can enhance the

driving effect of green consumption.

In addition to commercial operations, this psychological logic can also be used for public environmental outreach. Guided by aesthetic trends and group influence can further popularize the concept of green clothing and continuously expand the audience of sustainable clothing.

This study relies on literature and secondary data for analysis, and no offline questionnaire survey has been conducted yet. Subsequent empirical studies can explore consumer psychology across different scenarios and optimize relevant promotion strategies.

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