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Responsibility Attribution and Consumer Behaviour in the Light of the Bangladesh Factory Collapse

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The current fashion system is highly unsustainable, as continuous overproduction and over-consumption is contributing to environmental as well as social degradation. The aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between consumers' perceived responsibility for the non-sustainability of the fashion industry, diffusion of responsibility between different actors, label knowledge and use, perceived external barriers and environmental apparel consumption. Theoretically, we combine the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability-Model with norm activation theory. We use a representative sample of young Swedish consumers for our analysis. Findings show that perceived personal responsibility as well as label knowledge and use enhance environmental apparel consumption. The small but significant negative effect of perceived responsibility diffusion on environmental apparel consumption indicates that responsibilities between relevant actors might have to be delegated more explicitly than it happens today.

Introduction

The fashion industry operates on anything but sustainable grounds. The high uses of water, chemicals and other resources as well as unfair working conditions and unacceptably unsafe work sites have long been critiqued. The Bangladeshi factory fire that happened in late 2012 and the factory collapse at the beginning of 2013 where more than thousand factory workers died are recent examples. Media worldwide reported these tragedies and fashion retailers finally signed – after years of rejection – an international code of conduct to improve safety standards in the production countries. To date, it is widely unknown whether and how fashion consumers reacted on these events beyond some critical blogs and short-lived switches to non-affected fashion brands. However, in order to achieve a more sustainable fashion system, all actors – fashion producers, retailers, policy-makers, the media, NGOs and consumers – are called to take on their share of responsibility. The focus of this paper is: In the context of the Bangladesh factory collapse, we first investigate how far consumers perceive personal responsibility as regards the unsustainability of the fashion industry and to what extent consumers assign responsibility to different actors involved. Secondly, we explore how the perceived responsibility and perceived responsibility diffusion as well as perceived barriers, label knowledge and label use influence sustainable fashion consumption behaviour.

Background: Textile Production in Bangladesh

The prevalent fast fashion system is characterized by tremendous overproduction, caused by ever changing trends, low prices, planned obsolescence and high volumes of waste. At the same time, the production of clothing consumes vast resources and is highly environmentally and socially unsustainable. Fashion production requires extensive use of energy, water, pesticide and other hazardous chemicals which harm the environment and impair the health of labourers at the manufacturing facilities (Lynch 2009; Greenpeace 2011).

Moreover, social sustainability is jeopardized by current fashion production systems that are widely characterized by child labour, low wages, long working hours, unsafe work places and precarious employment conditions characterise the unsociable working conditions for a large group of workers in the fashion industry (Allwood et al. 2006; Connell 2010).

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest producer of textiles after China. Its gross domestic product is rapidly growing, mainly due to the textile industry. However, Bangladesh also is an exemplary model of the downside of fast fashion. Investments need to be made in order to live up to the challenges of overcrowding and fast expanding cities as well as to offer employees a safe working environment (Fowler 2010). So far, little of the profits made within the textile industry have been invested in improving infrastructure and safety. Necessary changes are much needed, but complicated due to a complex network of large companies often subcontracting smaller companies (Bearnot 2013). This system increases availability and enables the manufacturers to deliver changes quickly – as fast fashion demands today. It is also able to significantly reduce prices, yet this is often realised through unsafe and unsustainable practices. The Rana Plaza factory collapse in April 2013 revealed these conditions in an inconceivable and tragic way and brought them into international media discussion and to the consumer's awareness.

Even though various initiatives have been initialised following the Rana Plaza factory collapse, there is still a long way to go before we see a sustainable fashion industry. The most direct way to create a reliable and sustainable production system is by implementing environmental as well as ethical standards to reduce the impact of the fashion industry on nature and humans. Thereby consumers can also take on their share of responsibility – if they demand sustainable fashion, the process of change can be accelerated.

Theoretical approach and aim of the study

Sustainable consumption is often discussed from a "drivers and barriers" perspective, whereas the question of potential barriers and drivers for sustainable consumption behaviour is highly complex (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). As previous research has shown, there is often a gap between consumers' attitude or intention to consume in a sustainable way and their actual purchase behaviour (Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt 2010; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Therefore internal as well as external factors influencing behaviour need to be taken into consideration in order to form a holistic perspective and facilitate behaviour change (Clark, Kotchen and Moore 2003). In our theoretical framework we integrate two well-established models to explain consumer behaviour: the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability-Behaviour model (MOAB) (Thøgersen 2010; MacInnis 1991) and the norm activation theory (Schwartz 1970).

According to the MOAB model, *motivation*, *ability* and *opportunity* play a crucial role for behaviour change. While the model has mostly been used to analyse environmentally friendly behaviour such as recycling or use of public transport (Thøgersen 2009; Thøgersen 1994), it can well be applied to social and ethical factors as well. In both cases, it helps explain attitude-behaviour inconsistencies (Ølander and Thøgersen 1995).

Important factors of *motivation* are environmental concern, internalised norms and self-efficacy (Thøgersen 2010). In our study we build on Schwartz's norm activation theory and include attribution of responsibility as an internalised norm. We investigate whether consumers' choices are influenced by how far they perceive themselves as responsible for the

unsustainability of the current fashion system and the extent they assign responsibility to other relevant actors.

Besides motivation, the MOAB model focuses on opportunity and ability as factors influencing consumer behaviour. As regards *opportunity*, we focus on as the availability, affordability, and accessibility (Reisch 1998) of sustainable product alternatives for the individual consumer. As regards *ability*, we look at internal resources and personal characteristics such as sufficient time, money and consumer competence, in particular knowledge and use of sustainable fashion labels.

We contribute to the literature by 1) investigating the effects of perceived responsibility and responsibility diffusion on sustainable consumer choices and by 2) exploring the influence of perceived barriers as well as label knowledge and use on consumer behaviour.

Consumer purchase behaviour and responsibility

The way towards sustainable fashion consumption raises the question about who takes responsibility for the transformation towards more sustainable consumption patterns. For sure, the consumer is potentially a strong force, creating a respective demand for socially and ecologically sound products. If consumers voice such a demand, sustainable products and services potentially will find their way from niche to mass market and could be established as competitive alternatives.

Thereby, sustainable purchase behaviour can be understood as a form of pro-social behaviour, because it benefits other consumers and creates individual costs rather than direct individual benefits for the consumer (Eisenberg and Miller 1987; De Groot and Steg 2009). Amongst others, social as well as personal norms are predictive for pro-social behaviour. According to Schwartz's (1970) norm-activation theory, personal norms influence behaviour if an individual is a) aware of the potential consequences of his or her behaviour (awareness of consequences) and b) accepts a certain responsibility for these consequences (attribution of responsibility). Both factors contribute to an individual's realisation of a situation as moral choice. If awareness of consequences and attribution of responsibility increase, behaviour is more likely to be in line with existing moral norms (Van Liere and Dunlap 1978). Whereas the norm-activation theory was originally developed in the context of pro-social intentions and behaviour, it also has frequently been applied to environmental behaviour research (Milfont, Sibley and Duckitt 2010). For example, if individuals are aware of the consequences of their behaviour, those accepting personal responsibility are less likely to burn waste in their yard (Van Liere and Dunlap 1978), less likely to litter (Heberlein 1972), and more likely to accept energy-saving measures or a car disadvantaging transport pricing policy (De Groot and Steg 2009). Against this backcloth, it is hypothesised:

H1: Perceived consumer responsibility has a positive influence on sustainable fashion consumption.

Responsibility diffusion and non-behaviour

Getting on top of the mammoth task of transforming consumption patterns towards more sustainability cannot be done only by consumers themselves (Belz and Bilharz 2007). Even if consumers take on the responsibility of the consequences of their purchase behaviour, it is still questionable if they are actually able to fulfil this expectation considering the com-

plex supply chains and manufacturing methods in the fashion industry. Policy-makers, retailers, manufacturers, media, NGOs and consumers are involved alike. Based on the different roles and responsibilities of the many actors along the value chain of fashion production and consumption, a shared but actor-specific responsibility will be needed to successfully transform the system.

However, from shared responsibility it takes only a few steps to diffusion of responsibility, which is one of the main reasons for not taking action (Belz and Bilharz 2007). There is consistent evidence that the presence of others or the feeling of being part of a group inhibits pro-social behaviour. The so-called *bystander apathy effect* is a well-established phenomenon in social psychology and has been demonstrated in various classical studies (Darley and Latane 1968; Latane and Darley 1968). Individuals who face situations requiring pro-social behaviour respond slower and are less likely to respond at all if they are aware of other individuals present in the same situation. One possible explanation is the *diffusion of responsibility*. In the presence of others, an individual no longer feels solely responsible for the action. The potential costs of non-intervention are shared, leading to non-intervention becoming more likely (Chekround and Brauer 2002). Research has shown that the bystander apathy effect is not only restricted to emergency situations, but can be found within different settings such as hypothetical contributions to charity or volunteering to help out with an experiment (Garcia et al. 2002; Wiesenthal, Austrom and Silverman 1983). Thereby a diminished personal sense of accountability and responsibility does not necessarily depend on the physical presence of others. The mere notion of a group leads to the same effects – pro-social behaviour decreases with increasing numbers of others imagined (Garcia et al. 2002). It is therefore hypothesised:

H2: Responsibility diffusion amongst different actors has a negative influence on sustainable fashion consumption.

Internal and external factors influencing consumer behaviour

Even if consumers are aware of the consequences of their behaviour and assign responsibility for their actions to themselves, the costs for taking action and changing behaviours are important. As a consumer's motivation is a necessary, yet not a sufficient condition to show a certain type of behaviour, environmental factors need to be taken into account. If the behaviour becomes too complicated, time consuming or costly, it is less likely that consumers will engage in it (Sunstein 2013; Connell 2010). When assigning responsibility for transforming the fashion industry towards more sustainability to the consumer, it needs to be ensured that there are actual sustainable product alternatives and that the consumer is aware of those. It is hypothesised that:

H3a: Label knowledge and label use mediate the influence of perceived consumer responsibility on sustainable fashion consumption.

H3b: Perceived barriers mediate the influence of responsibility diffusion on sustainable fashion consumption.

Data and Methodology

Sample and Design

A large-scale, representative survey was conducted among young consumers in Sweden in 2013. The data collection was carried out by GfK Sweden shortly after the Rana Plaza factory collapse, during May and June 2013. It resulted in an overall sample size of 1,011 participants with an age between 16 and 30 (x = 24.27). The sample is representative within the given age group by sex, age, education and region. The survey addressed aspects of general fashion consumption with regard to purchase, maintenance and disposal and aspects of sustainable fashion. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their awareness of the Bangladesh factory collapse and to whom they ascribe responsibility.

Measures

Personal responsibility attribution and responsibility diffusion. Participants were asked to indicate whom they consider to be responsible for the non-sustainability of the fashion industry. For this purpose they were primed with the question 'Did you hear/read anything about the recent textile factory disaster in Bangladesh where a major clothing site, used by mostly European fashion brands, burned down due to unsafe conditions and more than 1,100 employees were killed?'. Afterwards they rated the grade of responsibility for policy makers, consumers in western countries, fashion retailers, manufactures in production countries and others, answering the question 'In the following, please indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being least responsible and 5 being most responsible) whom you consider responsible for the malaise of the fashion industry (i.e. the non-sustainability)'.

Perceived personal responsibility is assessed with the rating for the category, consumers in western countries. For calculating responsibility diffusion we first dichotomized the five variables of responsibility attribution (policy makers, consumers in western countries, fashion retailers, manufactures in production countries and others). Second we summed the score of the five binary variables. Thus, responsibility diffusion varies from 5 to 10, whereas 10 means complete responsibility diffusion.

Sustainable Consumption. Actual purchase behaviour is measured by the 'Environmental Apparel Consumption' scale (Kim & Damhorst, 1998). On seven items participants rate on a 5-point scale from 'never' to 'always' how frequently they consider environmental impact when buying clothes.

Ability. Label knowledge and label use are one facet of consumer ability. They were assessed for the EU Flower Label, Bra Miljöval, GOTS, Nordic Swan and Oeko-tex Standard 100. Answer categories ranged from 1 'never seen' to 4 'seen and know what it means' and from 1 'consider never' to 5 'consider always'. For every label, a product term label knowledge and label use (label knowledge x label use) is calculated.

Opportunity. One of the main barriers consumers face in an effort to purchase in an environmentally friendly way is the choice of attractive sustainable alternatives (Connell, 2010). Perceived availability, accessibility and affordability of sustainable clothing alternatives are an important situational factor to facilitate actual environmental apparel consumption. We used the original scale "Perceived ability to promote ethical trade" (Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004) which measures the respondents' perception of sustainable product alternatives and barriers on a 5-point scale from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree'.

Data analysis

We employ structural equation modelling (SEM, with IBM SPSS AMOS 20.0) to explore the relationships between perceived consumer responsibility, responsibility diffusion, label knowledge and label use, perceived barriers and environmental apparel consumption.

The measurement model is a confirmatory analytic model that has been fitted as a basis for the following structural equation analysis. The latent variables label knowledge x label use (Nordic and international), perceived barriers and environmental apparel consumption were measured through multiple items. The factor analysis showed that label knowledge x label use consists of two latent constructs – the group of Nordic labels Bra Miljöval and Nordic Swan and the international labels EU Flower Label, GOTS and Oeko-tex. All factor loadings are significant and substantial (Table 1). Perceived consumer responsibility and responsibility diffusion are included in the model as observed variables. The measurement model fits the data with $\chi^2(176) = 658.82$, NFI = .912, CFI = .934, RMSEA = .052 (90% confidence interval = [0.048, 0.056]), $R^2 = 0.37$.

Table 1. Measurement model (standardized estimates)

Item	Estimate	S.E.	P
Environmental Apparel Consumption			
Buy clothes with low impact or no dye processing.	,797		
Buy clothes with environmentally friendly labelling or packaging techniques.	,820	,036	.001
Buy clothes made from recycled material.	,777	,037	.001
Buy clothing made from organically grown natural fibres.	,815	,038	.001
Avoid clothes products because of environmental concerns.	,638	,045	.001
Purposely select fabrics that require cooler washing temperature, shorter drying time, or less ironing.	,563	,045	.001
Buy second-hand clothes.	,473	,050	.001
Perceived Barriers			
Sustainable clothing products are available in few stores.	,872		
There are not enough sustainable clothing product alternatives.	,770	,045	.001
Sustainable clothing choices are expensive.	,509	,039	.001
Information gathering about sustainability is difficult.	,477	,039	.001
Label Nordic			
Nordic Swan	,902		
Bra Miljöval	,914	,039	.001
Label International			
EU Flower Label	,713		
GOTS	,579	,053	.001
Oeko-tex Standard 100	,654	,073	.001

Item	Estimate	S.E.	P

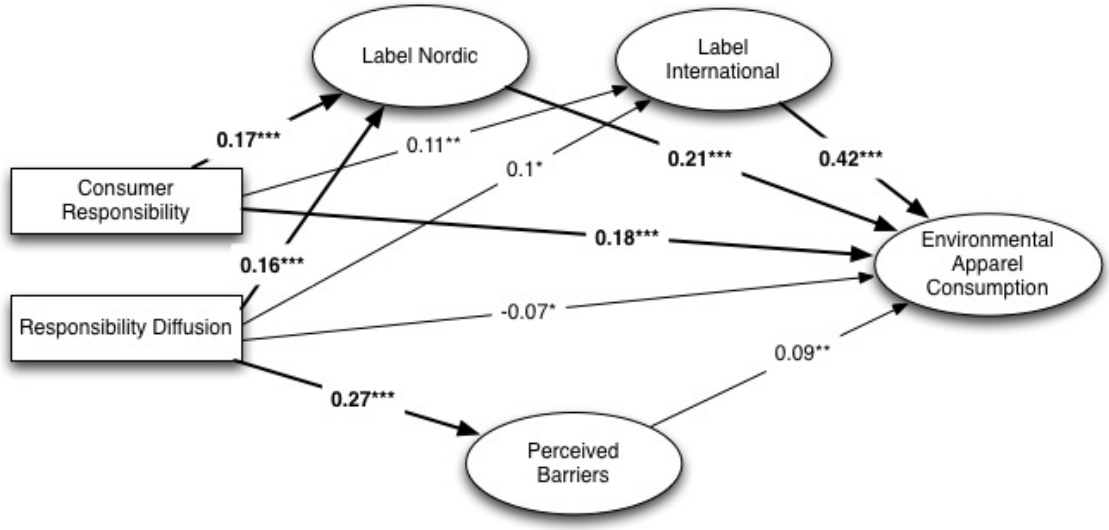
In the structural model, environmental apparel consumption is predicted with perceived consumer responsibility, responsibility diffusion, label knowledge x label use of Nordic and international labels and perceived barriers for environmental apparel consumption. As hypothesised we expected consumer responsibility to positively affect and responsibility diffusion to negatively affect environmental apparel consumption. Consumer responsibility and responsibility diffusion furthermore should predict label knowledge and use of Nordic and international labels as well as perceived barriers for environmental apparel consumption. Finally, label knowledge and use and perceived barriers are presumed to predict environmental apparel consumption. We control for age, sex and income.

Results

Asked about their awareness of the recent textile factory disaster in Bangladesh, 61.4 % of the consumers state that they have heard about the incident. On average consumers ascribe responsibility for the unsustainability of the fashion industry to themselves with x = 3.32 (SD = 1.1, Range = 1-5) and divide responsibility among different actors with x = 7.14 (SD = 1.24, Range = 5-10). Perceived barriers for environmental apparel consumption are reported with x = 14.24 (SD = 2.97, Range = 4-20). The two groups of labels differ in their degree of familiarity and use, with Nordic labels (x = 13.01, SD = 5.76, Range = 0-24) more well-known and used than international labels (x = 5.69, SD = 6.55, Range = 0-36). Environmental apparel consumption is reported rather low (x = 15.35, SD = 5.17, Range = 7-35). Figure 1 presents the results of the structural model with standardised estimates. Bold arrows show effects on a $p < 0.001$ significance level.

Figure 1 Structural equation model (standardized estimates)

Note: Model fit: $\chi^2(176) = 658.82$, NFI = .912, CFI = .934, RMSEA = .052 (90% confidence interval = [0.048, 0.056]);



*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

The structural model (Table 2) provides evidence for a direct positive affect of perceived consumer responsibility on environmental apparel consumption ($\beta = .175$, $p < 0.001$), which confirms hypothesis H1. Furthermore it has a positive affect on Nordic label knowledge x label use ($\beta = .174$, $p < 0.001$) and international label knowledge x label use ($\beta = .113$, $p = 0.009$) but no significant influence on perceived barriers.

For impact of responsibility diffusion, the standardized path coefficients (Table 2) show a small but significant direct negative effect of responsibility diffusion on environmental apparel consumption ($\beta = -0.074$, $p < 0.05$), which is in line with hypothesis H2. It has a positive effect on Nordic label knowledge x label use ($\beta = .16$, $p < 0.001$) and international label knowledge x label use ($\beta = .098$, $p = 0.023$). Furthermore it has a positive effect on perceived barriers ($\beta = .265$, $p < 0.001$).

The two types of labels vary in their degree of familiarity, whereby Nordic labels Bra Miljöval ($x = 3.18$) and Nordic Swan ($x = 3.31$) are more well known than the more apparel specific and international labels Oeko-tex Standard 100 ($x = 1.87$), EU Flower ($x = 1.75$) and GOTS ($x = 1.44$). Nordic label knowledge x label use has a positive affect on environmental apparel consumption ($\beta = .205$, $p < 0.001$), as well as international label knowledge x label use ($\beta = .415$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived barriers have a positive affect on environmental apparel consumption ($\beta = .205$, $p < 0.05$).

In order to investigate the indirect effect of perceived consumer responsibility via the two different groups of labels and of responsibility diffusion via perceived barriers, a mediation analysis is conducted (Table 3). The bias-corrected confidence intervals bootstrap method in AMOS has been used. Bootstrapping revealed that the indirect effect of consumer responsibility via Nordic label knowledge x use on environmental apparel consumption is significant ($a * b = 0.03$, $p < .01$). These results indicate that besides its direct effect, perceived consumer responsibility has a positive impact on environmental apparel consumption via Nordic label knowledge x label use, which is partially in line with H3a. The direct effect of perceived consumer responsibility remains significant if the two different groups of labels are excluded from the model. Furthermore the indirect effect of responsibility diffusion via perceived barriers on environmental apparel consumption is positive and significant ($a * b = 0.023$, $p < .05$). Yet the direct negative effect of responsibility diffusion on environmental apparel consumption is no longer significant when perceived barriers are excluded from the model. Therefore consumers that perceive more barriers also tend to assign responsibility to various stakeholders and they are more likely to show environmental apparel consumption. After correction for these associations it is revealed that the association between responsibility diffusion and environmental apparel consumption is actually negative once perceived barriers are controlled. Furthermore the relation between perceived barriers and environmental apparel consumption is weaker if responsibility diffusion is not controlled for. These results are in line with Hypothesis 3b.

Table 2 Structural model (standardized regression weights)

Path			Estimate	S.E.	P
Label Nordic	<---	Consumer responsibility	,174	,090	***
Label International	<---	Consumer responsibility	,113	,074	,009
Label Nordic	<---	Responsibility diffusion	,160	,079	***

Path			Estimate	S.E.	P
Label International	<---	Responsibility diffusion	,098	,066	,023
Perceived Barriers	<---	Responsibility diffusion	,265	,026	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Perceived Barriers	,085	,028	,012
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Label International	,415	,018	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Label Nordic	,205	,011	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Consumer responsibility	,175	,022	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Responsibility diffusion	-,074	,020	,031

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 3 Mediation analysis (standardized estimates)

Path			Estimate	S.E.	P
Label Nordic	<---	Consumer responsibility	,174	,090	***
Label International	<---	Consumer responsibility	,113	,074	,009
Label Nordic	<---	Responsibility diffusion	,160	,079	***
Label International	<---	Responsibility diffusion	,098	,066	,023
Perceived Barriers	<---	Responsibility diffusion	,265	,026	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Perceived Barriers	,085	,028	,012
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Label International	,415	,018	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Label Nordic	,205	,011	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Consumer responsibility	,175	,022	***
En. Apparel Consumption	<---	Responsibility diffusion	-,074	,020	,031

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Discussion

Five main actors influence private fashion consumption: fashion producers, retailers, governments, media and consumers themselves. Consumers are, at least partially, responsible for the consequences of their consumption choices, i.e., the size of their contribution to resource use and pollution. However, their lifestyles are often less sustainable than desired by their own collective long-term interest and by society. Furthermore, they cannot be held responsible for a change towards sustainable fashion patterns on their own. The current study therefore aims to investigate the relationship between perceived consumer responsibility, perceived responsibility diffusion, perceived barriers, label knowledge and label use and how they are related to environmental apparel consumption.

The results of a large-scale survey among young Swedish consumers show that the ascription of personal responsibility of consumers has a significant positive influence on environmental apparel consumption. Moreover label knowledge and label use have a strong influence on environmental apparel consumption. Analysis showed that a differentiation between the more general Nordic labels Bra Miljöval and Nordic Swan and the more fashion context specific and international labels EU Flower Label, GOTS and Oeko-tex needs to be

made. The latter have an even stronger influence on environmental apparel consumption, yet are by far less well known than the Nordic labels. Perceived barriers for ethical trade are positively related to environmental apparel consumption, which is surprising to some extent. Possibly, increased environmental apparel consumption is accompanied by a rising awareness of potential difficulties and hassles. This again supports that consumers cannot fulfil the change towards more sustainable fashion consumption on their own. Still, the small but significant negative effect of responsibility attribution on environmental apparel consumption when controlling for perceived barriers shows that simple agreement on shared responsibility seems to be insufficient.

Even though results in this study do not put forward a strong case for the obstructive impact of responsibility diffusion on sustainable consumption, the significant connection should encourage reflections on the usefulness of scattering the responsibility for sustainable consumption among various stakeholders. One solution might be to clarify exactly and define who is responsible for each step in the consumption process. As we did not measure responsibility diffusion on a separate scale, but operationalised it with the sum score of ratings of different stakeholders' responsibility as an indicator for diffusion, the information we obtained might not be exhaustive. Further research might look at more detailed measures and ways of responsibility diffusion. For example, an empirical answer to the question of whom do consumers consider responsible for what, and for what do they take personal responsibility, would be helpful for meeting the above mentioned goal of assigning particular responsibilities.

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