

Motive activation in business models for sustainable textiles: A field study

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Consumers' choices are a key aspect affecting the success of sustainability-oriented business models in the textiles industry. One important determinant influencing consumers' purchase behaviour with regard to choosing sustainable or conventional textiles is egoistic and altruistic motives (Bamberg & Möser, 2007). A proper definition of these two motives can be derived from Batson (2008): "*by altruism I mean a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare. Altruism is juxtaposed to egoism, a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing one's own welfare*". However, in psychological science, there is some inconsistency about the relevance of egoistic and altruistic motives for decision making. On the one hand, altruistic motive activation seems to increase sustainable purchasing behaviour (Bolderdijk et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). This may occur because people want to maintain a favourable view of themselves (Bolderdijk et al., 2012). On the other hand, more recent research concludes that egoistic motive activation may be more successful if nature appreciation is connected to personal benefits (Kibbe et al., 2014).

Motive activation takes place in those elements of business models that are most closely linked to customers. These include firstly the *value proposition* element, which denotes the offer to the customer and comprises both material and immaterial aspects (Osterwalder et al., 2005; Lambert, 2012; Abdelkafi et al., 2013). Secondly, business models also entail an element relating to how the properties of the offer are communicated to the customer (Abdelkafi et al., 2013; Bieger & Reinholt, 2011), which plays a central role in activating customers' motives. While the different elements of a business model are inherently interrelated, they can still be adapted individually (Al-Debei & Avison, 2010). It is therefore possible that two business models with a similar offer take different approaches in communicating it to their customers. For instance, the companies Hess Natur and Armed Angels both offer –according to their self-descriptions – socially and ecologically responsible clothing with timeless design. Thus, there is significant overlap between both value propositions and both businesses strive to influence consumer choices towards acquiring sustainable textiles rather than conventional ones. However, the business models differ in their approach to communication: The Hess Natur website emphasizes benefits to the environment and to workers in the clothing industry, as well as showing images of people in nature (Hess Natur, 2017), which can be interpreted as a focus on altruistic motives. The Armed Angels website, on the other hand, accentuates the beauty and style of the clothing (Armed Angels, 2017). It depicts people wearing the garments exclusively against monochrome backgrounds reminiscent of haute couture fashion photography. This can be interpreted as stressing egoistic motives.

In order to understand which motive activation could have a stronger influence on customer choices, a field experiment was conducted, where the same value proposition – a bag made from sustainable textiles – was offered in direct competition to a conventional one, once while activating altruistic motives and once while activating egoistic motives.

To test the behaviour relevance of the motives in a real-world setting, both sustainable and conventional bags were sold in a University Shop in Halle, Germany. Motives were activated by displaying a picture of beautiful nature (altruistic) or a picture of coins and banknotes (egoistic) leaning on the work of Gasiorowska et al. (2012). Data was analysed using crosstabs to compare sales

volumes and a configural frequency analysis to test if the comparison in each of the cells was significant. Our findings provide further evidence of the benefits of egoistic motive activation. Egoistic motives induced by displaying a picture of money in the shop increased the purchase of sustainable bags and inhibited the purchase of conventional bags compared to expected sales volumes. The purchase of sustainable bags dropped under the estimated sales in the altruistic motive condition. Thus, our findings indicate that egoistic motives are more relevant for consumers with regard to acquiring sustainable textiles compared to altruistic motives.

To ensure a realistic approach in our field study and to examine the borders of motive activation, the price of sustainable bags was varied. The results show that the effect of the egoistic motive activation disappears when the price of sustainable bags is 60% higher than the price for the conventional bags.

These results may suggest that sustainability-oriented business models emphasizing especially personal benefits of their offer besides listing the environmental benefits can increase sales of sustainable textiles. The results will be discussed for interventions to support sustainable consumption.

Further research is needed into the financial outcomes of business models focussing on either motive, to see whether motive activation is a key determinant of success in the marketplace. Additionally, research into the role of motive activation in other elements of a business model – particularly the value proposition but also distribution channels – could provide additional insights into influencing purchasing behaviour with regards to sustainable textiles.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the funding provided by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) to our interdisciplinary Slow Fashion research project, as part of the “Research for Sustainable Development” (FONA) framework programme. We want to thank Sophie Fiebig from the MSH Medicalschool Hamburg, who participated in the field study and provided data in the framework of her Bachelor thesis.