Are You Ready for Clothing with Environmental and Social Labels?

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Background and Literature Review. For the fashion industry to be sustainable economically, it must be sustainable socially and environmentally too (Forum for the Future, n.d.). Brands need to increase consumer awareness of their environmentally and socially responsible business practices. Apparel labelling is one of the main ways that a consumer can learn about the products they are interested in purchasing. Apparel labels are typically used to show legally required information such as the fiber content, care instructions and country of origin. The other use of labels is to share information such as the brand name, product attributes and brand missions or philosophies. Nowadays, more and more apparel labelling programs aim to provide meaningful information to the consumers regarding the social and environmental aspects of the product, including The Oeko-Tex Standard 100, The Global Organic Textile Standard, Ecolabel by EU, Fairtrade, B Corp, etc. Not only do they focus on providing labelling systems, they support and promote sustainable and ethical manufacturing beginning at the farm where the fibers are produced and ending at the end consumers.

It has been found previously that retail brands can benefit from stressing sustainability-related attributes of products through the use of labelling as it influences consumers' purchase decision (Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010; 2008; Hwang, Lee, & Diddi, 2015; Hyllegard, Ogle, & Yan, 2014; Tong & Su, 2018). Although the programs such as the ones described above provide credible labelling within the apparel marketplace, D'Souza, Taghian, Lamb, and Peretiatko (2007) found that Australian consumers have poor knowledge of eco-labelling and are only aware of generic labelling using terms such as "biodegradable" and "recyclable". Moreover, Aspers (2008)'s research found that European consumers are overwhelmed with the amount of information that is provided to them, and the addition of environmental labelling only further complicates the decision-making process. Within the literature work of apparel labelling and sustainable labels, there lacks updated information about US consumer's perceptions of apparel labelling. This study aims to empirically address how US consumers perceive apparel labelling and sustainable apparel labels, and if there are any differences among different age groups on their perceptions. The research provides valuable insights to the apparel industry.

Method. The primary source of data used for this study was conducted through a large-scale survey to collect quantitative data from a random sample of US consumers. The survey consisted of questions regarding demographic data and consumer experience and perceptions of environmental and ethical labelling of apparel products. The demographic questions inquired about the participants age, gender, race, education level, marital status, income and occupation. Five-point Likert scale questions were used for this survey and were adapted from the previous research (Goswami, 2008; D'Souza et al., 2007; Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010). The survey was created using Qualtrics software and distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). 500 responses were collected, however, after data cleaning and screening, there were a total of 399 usable responses collected from this survey.

Results. Participants aged 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and 45 and older accounted for 13.8%, 51.6%, 19.8% and 14.8% of survey takers. 55.6% of the respondents are male and 43.6% are female. Detailed demographic profiles of the respondents and results are available upon request.

78.2% of respondents indicated that they have purchased environmentally and socially responsible clothing products during the last five years. Regarding consumer's perception about apparel labelling, over 60% of respondents strongly agree or agree with the following statements "I always read labels when I purchase apparel", "I rely on past experience in purchasing instead of reading the labels", "I am satisfied with apparel labels", and "Instructions for use need to be included on labels." The respondents indicate that labels on apparel products are hard to understand with only 28.9% responding "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree". A series of ANOVA tests show significant differences across the four age groups (18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45 and older) for the following statements "I rely on past experience in purchasing instead of reading the labels" ($F = 3.189$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.05$), "Labels on apparel products are hard to understand" ($F = 4.667$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.01$), "Labels on apparel products are accurate" ($F = 4.452$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.01$), and "I don't really have time to read labels when I am shopping for apparel products" ($F = 9.280$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.01$). The means for each of the groups indicate that younger age groups are more likely to feel labels are hard to understand, more rely on past experience, and are more likely to not to read labels when they are shopping for apparel products.

Regarding consumer's attitude towards environmental and/or social labels on apparel products, over 75% of respondents strongly agree or agree that environmental information (e.g. organic cotton logo, organic certificate, eco-labels, recycled materials), social information on apparel product labels (e.g. "fair trade", "fair labor condition", "good working condition", "ethically sourced"), and "Made in the USA" information is important on apparel labels. Over 74% of respondents strongly agree or agree that "I believe that the information like "locally grown", "locally produced", "US grown" on apparel product label is important". ANOVA tests conclude that there is no difference in consumers' attitudes toward the importance of environmental and/or social information on apparel labels for four age groups.

Regarding their perceptions of environmental and/or social labelling of apparel products, over 60% of respondents strongly agree or agree with the statements "I am satisfied with the environmental and/or social labels on apparel products" and "I generally believe in the environmental and/or social information on apparel product labels". Only 25.1% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the statement "Environmental and/or social labels on apparel products are hard to understand". ANOVA tests indicate significant differences across the four age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45 and older) regarding the following statements "Environmental and/or social labels on apparel products are hard to understand" ($F = 7.124$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.01$), "I believe that the information on environmental and/or social labels of apparel products is accurate" ($F = 2.991$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.05$), "I don't understand the concepts on environmental and/or social labels of apparel products" ($F = 7.632$, $df = 3/386$, $p < 0.01$). The means for each of the groups indicate that younger age groups are more likely to feel environmental and/or social labels are hard to understand than older generations.

Discussion and Conclusions. The results demonstrate that apparel labels are important for consumers' purchase decision and consumers expressed positive sentiments towards sustainable apparel labelling, yet they may not have much knowledge about sustainable apparel labels or their meanings, especially for younger consumers. This indicates that brands should invest in marketing towards younger consumers regarding their practices. Brands looking to become more transparent about their production will need to find new ways to reach their target market by accurately labelling products and educating their consumers

about these claims. The study concluded with several limitations that could be solved in future research effort.

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