



## **A Look at the Label: Exploring Consumer Perspectives on Communicating Sustainability Information**

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According to the EPA, of the 11,940 million tons of clothing and footwear produced in the United States in 2015, 8.2 million tons were landfilled, while only 1.7 million tons were recycled (United States Environmental, n.d.). This is just one example of the negative effects of increasingly rapid fashion cycles. Other examples include subjecting employees to poor labor conditions, such as low wages, long hours, and dangerous work environments (Ross & Morgan, 2015).

To address these negative effects, a shift in consumer behavior away from fast fashion to a more sustainable form of fashion consumption, or socially responsible fashion consumption (SRFC) is needed. It appears that this approach to fashion consumption is becoming more popular, as a recent Cone Communications (2017) study found that 87% of the general population wants to buy a product with a social or environmental benefit. However, consistently noted barriers to SRFC include a lack of consumer knowledge concerning the ethical issues that surround fast fashion apparel (Gupta & Gentry, 2018), where to obtain accurate information regarding the sustainability of products (James & Montgomery, 2017; Turker & Altuntas, 2014) and how sustainable products actually are (McNeill & Moore, 2015). For these reasons, even if consumers wanted to engage in SRFC, many likely do not have the requisite knowledge to do so.

Could providing sustainability labeling on apparel, such as information related to how an item was produced, enhance consumer knowledge and thus positively impact SRFC? Preliminary research suggests the answer is yes, as consumers have expressed an interest in knowing more about the quality of the materials used in apparel products, as well as the working conditions of apparel laborers (Sustainable Apparel Coalition, 2019). Initial findings indicate that such information should be concise, easy to understand, could take the form of an index, include visual stories, and should be displayed on hang tags, brand websites, social media, videos, on product labels, or via QR codes (Sustainable Apparel Coalition, 2019; Yudina, 2017). Additionally, prior research has determined that consumers have more positive attitudes toward hangtags with prosocial claims than hangtags without such claims, and some are willing to pay more for socially-labeled apparel (Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle & Lee, 2012).

Although existing research provides a basic understanding of consumer's sustainability communication preferences in regards to apparel, there is a lack of knowledge about what aspects of sustainability resonate with consumers and why. Moreover, studies have not fully

Page 1 of 4

examined the types or methods of communication preferred by consumers, how such communication might impact their apparel consumption decision-making, and whether it would be of benefit for them to know how to consume apparel more sustainably. Thus, the purpose of this study was to address these gaps in the existing literature by exploring such issues from the perspective of the consumer.

Upon receipt of IRB approval from the researchers' university, primary data were collected by utilizing convenience sampling to recruit 20 participants ranging in age from 18 to 59 years old, including both males (6) and females (14). Participants were Hispanic (15%), Caucasian (55%), Asian (10%) and African American (20%). In depth interviews were conducted in person and by phone. Prior to the interview, participants were told that, in the context of this study, sustainability refers to consuming and producing items in a manner today that does not infringe upon the ability of future generations to do the same, a concept outlined in the United Nations' Brundtland Report (The Brundtland Report, n.d.). Participants were told that there are often 3 Ps, or aspects, associated with sustainability: people, profit, and planet, referring to the "triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1999). This information was meant to help participants better understand the context of the questions they were being asked. Interview questions focused on what aspects of sustainability are of interest, how that information should be communicated to them, to what extent labeling might impact their consumption of apparel, and whether they are interested in increasing sustainability within their apparel consumption behaviors. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and iteratively analyzed to identify categories of meaning consistent across all interviews (Hodges, 2011). Analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three emergent themes related to communicating information about sustainability that were used to structure the interpretation: *Its Importance is Relative*, *Communication Mode vs. Message*, and *Increasing the Interest Level*.

According to participants, the aspects of sustainability that were of importance were relative to participants' knowledge of, connection to, and perceived ability to positively impact them. For instance, most of the participants cited people as the most important of the 3Ps because they had knowledge concerning unethical working conditions, a shared human connection with others, and felt they possessed an ability to improve working conditions by boycotting unethical production practices. For example, Katie said she would not want to wear clothing that was produced in bad working conditions because "...like imagine if I was working there, or if that was my family working there...." Participants think that the best mode of sustainability communication is garment labeling, and that sustainability labeling would play a positive role relative to their intentions to purchase sustainable apparel. This finding supports those of Hyllegard et al. (2012) and is largely because inclusion of this information would allow participants to choose apparel that was produced more sustainably, even if it meant they would have to pay a modest increase in price. Going beyond the findings of previous studies, participants in the present study noted that in order to pay attention to such information, there should be in-store signage or store areas dedicated to sustainably produced apparel. In addition, printing sustainability information on the inside of apparel, so it could not be removed and was not materially wasteful, was also preferred.

As far as participants' preferences for the message communicated by the label, they indicated that sustainability labeling should have the following characteristics: come from a trusted source, be easily accessible and be simplistic yet detailed. Participants expressed particular interest in knowing whether garment production involved the use of child labor. They also wanted to know where the item was produced, the working conditions, and the materials used. This information supports findings of prior studies on the topic, including James and Montgomery (2017) and McNeill and Moore (2015). Interestingly, however, participants expressed a desire to not only know this information, but also how or why this information mattered. As Donald stated "...you have to tell me why, why the clothing would be good or bad and if it hurts people...I need to know what's going on with it." Overall, participants were in favor of a sustainability index that represents how sustainable an apparel item is, as long as it is easy to understand what the index means for them. This issue reinforces the findings of Yudina (2017) on the utility of a sustainability index, however, it also extends them by pointing to the need for clearly articulating its relevance to consumers.

Results of this exploratory study offer insight into aspects of sustainability that resonate with consumers, as well as the ways by which consumers prefer to receive apparel-related sustainability information. Although this study is somewhat limited by its small sample size, which prevents findings from being generalizable to a larger population, results support the positive benefits of sustainability garment labeling. Research is needed that examines the effectiveness of communication strategies for encouraging SRFC, and particularly those strategies that involve messages that are meaningful to consumers.

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