Transformative Learning Connected to the Triple Bottom Line of Apparel Business Sustainability: A Thematic Analysis

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Introduction: Nowadays, many companies use the term ‘sustainability’ for their business strategies to promote their products or services. For the sustainable products, it should possess some prerequisite conditions such as economically sustainable, socially responsible, and environmental friendly (Pessoa, Matos, Sotoriva, & Souto, 2012). Sustainability is a concept dealing with the satisfaction of present needs without compromising the well-being of future generations by the conservation of natural resources (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). To assess the performance of a company, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory is widely used, which measures the economic, social, and environmental performance of an organization. Even though the small or large changes regarding sustainability are practiced in the apparel markets by the companies, there is a big gap presence from the consumers’ side (Grubor & Milovanov, 2017). What do apparel consumers know about sustainability? How can we educate apparel consumers and be active together in terms of sustainability? Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand apparel consumers’ knowledge of the sustainability and how it is discussed after watching the video about sustainability and participating activities of website browsing, so that we can explore an effective way to educate the consumer groups who can inspire the companies to adopt sustainable supply chain processes.

Literature Review: Sustainability is defined as availing the best out of any available resources without compromising future needs (Hassan & Lee, 2015). For the long-term management of the available resources, sustainability is widely used as a strategic plan in many government and non-government organizations (Peattie, 2001). Sustainability is not only showing the importance of economy, society, and environment; but it is also demonstrating the interdependence among these three aspects. The sustainability concept has provided an idea for sustainable production and consumption by combining all three aspects and by working in collaboration with each other. Textile and apparel sectors have drawn the attention of the world about their non-sustainability activities after several environmental and manmade incidents happened in last few years, including the factory collapse in Bangladesh and industries excessive water consumption for materials processing (Sinkovics et al., 2016). Thus, it is important for apparel companies to put more efforts on sustainable practices. Apparel consumers also need to be involved in the sustainable business process as they play important roles to influence the company decision (Ciasullo et al., 2017).

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory explains sustainability by incorporating three pillars in it, which are economic, social, and environmental aspects (Adams). According to the Commission of the European (2001), The TBL is an idea to measure the overall achievement of the company based on the contribution to economic progress, social accountability, and environmental quality. This theory is widely accepted by different business organizations. Therefore, this study addressed to find an effective way to educate the consumers to broaden the

knowledge of different aspects of sustainability based on the TBL model. Transformative Learning is another important theoretical background for this study and it explains that people transform the meaning of any story, incidents, or facts based on their reflection, experience, and interaction with that event (Mezirow, 2018). We applied this theory in this study to understand the problem recognition and knowledge integration through interactive environments (Kitchenham, 2008).

Method: A qualitative research design of focus group discussion was used for this study. Participants were recruited from the Southwestern University's large sample pool, called the SONA system. Generation Y and Z consumers were recruited as they will be the ethical consumers caring of the next generations have more interest in fashion and sustainability. First, warm-up questions about their apparel shopping behaviors and sustainability were asked. Then we played the video about sustainability with the TBL and they participated another discussion about how they think sustainability differently after watching the video. Lastly, we asked them to browse the websites of two famous apparel brands (i.e., Patagonia and H&M as they are well-reputed fast fashion and outdoor brands, respectively, participating in sustainability activities) and discussed about what they found on there. Also, we asked them to discuss about what they think the apparel companies and consumers do to be sustainable in all three aspects. The pseudonyms were provided to the participants randomly for the confidentiality and all of the participants discussed 45 to 90 minutes long. The thematic analysis technique was used for data interpretation. The verbatim transcribed data were reviewed and analyzed thoroughly, and codes were generated. Then the pattern searching was done in the generated codes from the whole discussion. Until reaching an agreement the researchers continued and repeated the process.

Results: A total of 21 participants are aged between 18 to 25 years. The five themes are *Normalizing Customer Activism*, *Short-Sighted Actions*, *Story Sharing with Others*, *Filling the Information Gap*, and *Challenging but Not Impossible*. First, *Normalizing Customer Activism* theme shows that most of the participants feel the needs of these actions to be routines of their lives. The second theme of *Short-Sighted Actions* explained that consumers see the limited actions taken by apparel companies. They found the challenges of the store locations, low product quality and durability, and unavailability of sustainability practicing of apparel companies. The third theme of *Story Sharing with Others* showed the feelings of the participants' responsibility on sustainability to the society. Fourth, *Filling the Information Gap* theme is associated with a big gap in providing information to the consumers by apparel companies. The last theme of *Challenging but Not Impossible* emerged as participants think that the sustainability practices of the companies cannot change drastically, but it will slowly but surely happen as this can be solution to keep this world livable for our future generation.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Focus Group Discussion Participants

Focus Group 1				Focus Group 2			
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Diane	21	Female	Caucasian	Emma	21	Female	Caucasian
Helen	19	Female	Caucasian	Emily	20	Female	Hispanic/Latino
Gabby	20	Female	Caucasian	Johnny	19	Male	Caucasian
Isabel	20	Female	Caucasian	Daniel	25	Male	Caucasian
Cole	22	Male	Asian				
Ellie	20	Female	Caucasian				
Jayne	24	Female	African American				
Christina	21	Female	Hispanic/Latino				
Lily	21	Female	African American				
Faith	21	Female	Caucasian				
Focus Group 3				Focus Group 4			
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Sarah	21	Female	Caucasian	Arya	20	Female	African American
Maya	20	Female	African American	James	19	Male	African American
Ruby	18	Female	Caucasian	Lisa	21	Female	Caucasian
Nova	20	Female	Caucasian				

Discussion and Implications: The findings of this research provide an in-depth understanding of the sustainability perception of consumers about apparel brands and their learning experiences. Interestingly, it was revealed that the participants' sustainability is only an environmental issue to them before providing sustainability-related information, whereas their perception shifted from environment to society after educated. As a consequence, all three aspects of sustainability, TBL, become equally important to the participants. They acquire the knowledge that sustainability is not only an environmental issue, but also economic and social balance as well. Our findings suggest that turning the sustainable product-based business from non-sustainable is not an overnight process. But providing some knowledge of sustainable behavior to people in different stages of education can speed up the process of producing and purchasing sustainable goods as well. As suggested in Transformative Learning theory, introducing assumption, experience or belief-based reference frame for any subject can provide effective transformation of the learning.

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