**The Effect of an Apparel Sustainability Index:**

**A Conceptual Model and Propositional Inventory**

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**Introduction:** According to Cone Communications (2017), sustainable and responsible fashion consumption (SRFC) should not be difficult to influence as 87% of the general population indicates a desire to buy a product with a social or environmental benefit. However, despite general approval of the idea among consumers and their intentions to support such goods, studies suggest that consumers often do not follow through in terms of actual behavior, resulting in an intention-behavior gap (James & Montgomery, 2017). Barriers that increase the intention-behavior gap include a lack of consumer knowledge regarding the sustainability of apparel, and hesitancy to be transparent about supply chains on the part of brands (James & Montgomery, 2017). One possible solution to overcome these barriers is the implementation of a sustainability index label, affixed to apparel, that could inform consumers of an apparel item’s environmental and social costs. Although previous research has focused on the implementation of ecological and social labels on apparel (Koszewska, 2011) as well as the effect of such labels on attitude toward the brand and purchase intention (Hyllegard et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2017), there is a knowledge gap concerning the effect of an apparel sustainability index on brand equity and brand resonance. Thus, the purpose of this conceptual model is to suggest a propositional inventory, including the moderating effects of knowledge and values to enhance attitude and brand evaluations, to close this gap.

**Development of Conceptual Framework:** Signaling theory was used to guide the development of the conceptual framework. Information asymmetry exists in the apparel industry given that brands are privy to the sustainability of their supply chain, yet they often choose not to communicate this information to consumers (James & Montgomery, 2017). Should consumers have access to this information, they may be influenced to engage in SRFC (James & Montgomery, 2017). Signaling theory maintains that the *signaler* is the entity that has information. The *signal* is how that information is communicated to a *receiver*, or the audience who does not have the information but would like to receive it (Connelly et al., 2011). As illustrated in Figure 1, the signaler is the brand utilizing the sustainability index. The sustainability index is the signal, and the receiver is the consumer of the brand. The conceptual model hypothesizes that feedback to the signaler will take the form of brand equity and brand resonance. In this model, both the signaler and the receiver benefits, as the signaler gains brand equity and brand resonance from using the index, while the receiver gains knowledge regarding the sustainability of their apparel consumption behaviors, thereby enabling them to make informed purchasing decisions (Connelly et al., 2011).

The proposed conceptual model hypothesizes that the value of the sustainability index, as well as its observability, will affect consumer attitudes. This is because noticeable signals are more readily acted upon than those that are inconspicuous, and high index values will result in less signal costs (Connelly et al., 2011) leading to more positive consumer attitudes. **Proposition 1:** A high sustainability index value will result in more favorable attitudes towards the brand and brand evaluations than a low sustainability index value. **Proposition 2:** A visible index placement will result in more favorable attitudes towards the brand and brand evaluations than an inconspicuous index placement. **Proposition 3:** There will be an interaction effect between a sustainability index value and an index placement on consumer attitudes and brand evaluations.

Knowledge and values are proposed to moderate the effect of an apparel sustainability index, as prior research suggests that the more knowledge consumers have, the more likely they will have positive attitudes towards socially and environmentally friendly apparel (Kozar & Hiller Connell, 2013). Moreover, consumers that possess more altruistic values and/or biospheric values are motivated to behave in socially and/or environmentally responsible ways, such as consuming sustainable apparel (Kim & Seock, 2019).

**Proposition 4:** Consumer knowledge will moderate the relationship indicated in the Prepositions 1, 2, and 3**. Preposition 5:** Consumer values in terms of altruistic and/or biospheric values will moderate the relationship indicated in the prepositions 1, 2, and 3.

Past research suggests that positive brand attitudes result when brands are transparent about their supply chains (Hyllegard et al., 2012). Thus, this model proposes that positive brand attitudes will positively influence brand equity, and particularly the dimensions of brand loyalty, brand associations, and brand awareness. Prior research notes that brand associations and brand awareness are positively affected by a firm’s corporate social responsibility efforts (Ramesh et al., 2019) and retailers that sell sustainable clothing and implement environmental stewardship practices benefit from increased customer loyalty (Dabija, 2018). Ultimately, the dimensions of brand equity coalesce in brand resonance, as brand resonance reflects the overall relationship a customer has with a brand (Keller, 2013).

**Proposition 6:** Positive attitudes toward the brand positively influence brand equity. **Proposition 7:** Brand equity positively influences brand resonance.

**Discussion:** The proposed conceptual model suggests that brand resonance will result from a brand’s use of an apparel sustainability index that communicates a high sustainability index value via a visible placement. Furthermore, moderating effects of knowledge and values may influence consumers’ attitudes towards a brand that uses a sustainability index. This conceptual model has managerial implications, in that brands may be incentivized to communicate the sustainability of their supply chains to gain brand resonance. Moreover, theoretically, the application of signaling theory to apparel sustainability could fill a void in the literature, as an apparel sustainability index may lead to increased consumer awareness, thereby overcoming the barriers of SRFC and narrowing the intention-behavior gap. Future research should empirically test this model and its propositions using an experimental design.



Figure 1. The effect of an apparel sustainability index.

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