

Sustainability and Transparency in the Global Cotton Supply Chain: A Practice-Based Experiential Learning Opportunity Tracing Stakeholder Opinion

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Introduction The global supply chain for most textile and apparel (T&A) firms contributes to a variety of environmental and ethical issues worldwide. Sustainability issues are prevalent throughout the entire T&A supply chain, and the cotton industry is no exception. Within the global cotton supply chain, efforts to adopt improved sustainability practices have been underway for years. Experts are working to reduce the environmental impact of cotton and educate the public about new cotton growing and manufacturing innovations. The Cotton Ranking (2020) shows significant progress with major brands in the use of sustainable cotton. However, there is also a growing gap between companies that focus on sustainability and those that still do too little or nothing. As the T&A global supply chain is one of the most complex supply chains globally, T&A students need to understand the impact cotton has on the industry and the impact a sustainable cotton supply chain can have on the world. However, currently, there are limited teaching resources for students to gain knowledge regarding cotton sustainability. Due to the difficulties and inconsistencies surrounding sustainability communication and reporting, students have few opportunities to learn from the cotton supply chain stakeholder perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to develop a practice-based experiential learning project to provide students with an opportunity to explore and understand cotton supply chain sustainability and transparency through tracing public and stakeholder opinions. This project provided students tools and methods to collect first-hand industry information from key stakeholders in the cotton supply chain and further enhance students' understanding of the current transparency issues in the T&A industry. This project helped students learn how T&A companies communicate sustainability issues with stakeholders by tracing opinions from multiple parties involved in the T&A supply chain.

Experiential Learning Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (2001)'s experiential learning theory is used as a theoretical framework for this project. The basis of experiential learning is learning by doing. It focuses on having experiences while learning new things. The experiential learning process includes integrating knowledge, activity, and reflection (Kolb, 2014). Students participating in this project applied key concepts and new information to a "real world" setting by working on this project through various activities. Students were then able to create new knowledge, enhancing their problem-solving skills. This project was carried out in two classes: Global Sourcing and Consumer Data Analytics. Hands-on class projects, interviews with industry

experts, industry panels, and other assignments were designed and arranged to support the experiential learning process.

Student Learning Outcomes Through combining sustainability knowledge and cutting-edge data analytics methods, students were able to 1) gain knowledge about the T&A supply chain with an emphasis on cotton products; 2) understand sustainability and transparency practices throughout the entire cotton supply chain; 3) utilize different data sources and advanced analytic approaches to acquire information regarding sustainability and transparency issues; 4) prepare dataset and generate conclusions to make recommendations to enhance future sustainability and transparency practices in the global cotton industry. Students learn how to help social enterprises, T&A brands, and nonprofit organizations improve environmental and social sustainability and transparency. In turn, they strategize their communication to target the right audience effectively to make the maximum impact.

Project Detail In the Global Sourcing class, a group project was developed to explore sustainability and transparency issues in today's T&A supply chain. Students first learned the different roles within the T&A supply chain through lectures and discussions. Each group identified a T&A company and collected information related to sustainability and transparency from the stakeholders' perspective (media, nonprofit organizations, workers, and investors). Students were asked to create an excel database to locate key suppliers of a chosen T&A company, then evaluate their performance in the light of sustainability.

In the Consumer Data Analytics class, a group project was developed to analyze consumer perception of transparency through various data analytic approaches using The Case of Fashion Revolution Week. Students conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies to investigate consumer opinions regarding sustainability and transparency issues in the fashion industry. Also, a database was built, using social media data to provide T&A brands with associated country of origin (COO) information. Students were able to trace stakeholder opinion from social media data mining. Using the datasets gathered from the two-course projects listed above, an interactive map will be created during the 2021 summer that showcases the brands' supply chain transparency used in the projects. Suppliers' information, especially COO, will be labeled on the map. This map will be used by future courses to help visualize and better understand today's T&A supply chain transparency. The map will serve as a unique tool, allowing students to add their knowledge each semester as they work on these projects. In addition, a Sustainability Forum was held to bring presenters around the world to discuss how COVID-19 pandemic would reshape values around sustainability and wake up fashion consumers and companies to focus on sustainability-related issues.

Assessment of Outcome As this is still an ongoing project, the project's expected learning outcomes were and will be measured using student interviews, midterm teaching feedback, and

pre and post-surveys. Through midterm teaching feedback, students expressed that experiential learning has provided them unique opportunities to explore sustainability and transparency issues in the fashion industry. Especially, having direct conversations with industry experts has helped them understand current industry trends and make good connections with classroom knowledge and real-world needs.

Conclusion It is shown that adopting experiential learning in teaching may enhance students' learning experience. This teaching approach bridges the gap between textbook content and practical needs. Utilizing innovative teaching methods and tools, such as data visualization software and role play, this project effectively helps students learn how T&A companies communicate sustainability issues with stakeholders by tracing opinions from multiple parties involved in the T&A supply chain. Future improvements can be made once assessment data is available to instructors.

References

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