



A Cultural Examination of Environmentally Sustainable Apparel Knowledge and Attitudes from the Perspective of Kuwaiti Women

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Background and Purpose: Kuwait is a Muslim country of 2.8 million people in the Arabian Peninsula along the Persian Gulf. With a primary export of petroleum, it is a rapidly industrializing country with one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world. Kuwait's prosperity has led to a high degree of consumption among Kuwaitis (Riquelme, Rios, & Al-Sharhan, 2001) and the country becoming a thriving market for Western apparel brands (Kelly, 2010).

From a sustainability perspective, there is significant focus on reducing personal consumption of apparel; and supporting this effort is a growing body of sustainable consumer behavior research. However, none of this research includes Kuwaiti consumers – which is the purpose of this paper – to understand how Kuwaiti culture influences knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding environmentally sustainable apparel (ESA).

Theoretical Background: This study is framed within Hofstede's (2001) Theory of Cultural Dimensions. According to Hofstede, there are six dimensions of culture. The first dimension, power distance index (PDI), is the intensity by which a society is stratified by social class. The dimension of individualism (IDV) versus collectivism reflects the importance of personal achievements and individual rights in a society, and it is the degree to which people identify as distinct entities versus members of a larger group. Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), the third dimension, describes the propensity for people within a culture to take risks and their tolerance for ambiguity. The fourth cultural dimension, masculinity (MAS) versus femininity contrasts a culture's propensity for advancing within a hierarchy and embrace of new challenges versus cooperation and relationships. The dimension of long term orientation (LTO) describes the degree of importance that cultures place on planning for the future, and the final dimension, indulgence versus restraint (IVR), describes the social acceptability of impulsive behaviors.

Method: Utilizing qualitative research techniques, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine female Kuwaitis, who were randomly selected from a data set that was part of another study. Females were chosen because they are the primary purchasers of apparel in Kuwait. Interviews focused on the participants' perceptions about their culture and their awareness of and attitudes towards both environmental issues and ESA. The interviews occurred in Arabic and were transcribed in English – after which they were coded for themes and subthemes.

Findings: The research participants described Kuwait as having a complex culture that emphasizes a high standard of living and that is open to outside influences. The participants also asserted that most Kuwaitis are strongly affected by their Islamic religion, including clothing decisions. Friends, family, and community were also referenced as influential when making clothing decisions. In terms of the environment, the participants expressed concern about environment issues but were mostly unaware of personal actions to take be more

environmentally responsible. Additionally, while most participants believed textile and apparel manufacturing was environmentally harmful they were not able to articulate how. They also had no previous exposure to ESA. As a result, they only associated ESA with natural fibers and held neutral attitudes about ESA.

Hofstede (2015) classifies Kuwaiti culture as having a high PDI. However, this was not supported in this study – with participants believing Kuwait is a democratic society with limited social classes. On the other hand, Hofstede’s categorization of Kuwait as being collectivist in nature is supported by this study. In particular, the research participants asserted that friends and family strongly influenced their clothing choices – a behavior that would be less present within individualistic cultures. In terms of the third dimension (UAI), although Hofstede classifies Kuwait as having high uncertainty avoidance, the interviews did not reveal much insight into this dimension. Similarly, the study did not gain much understanding related to the dimension of MAS within Kuwait. Related to the dimension of LTO, it was evident from this study that participants had a short-term orientation. This conclusion is based on participants favoring high levels of consumption over saving money for the future. Finally, regarding the dimension of IVR, the ostentatious consumption of luxury goods revealed by the participants support the indulgence end of this dimension.

Discussion and Implications: In this study, LTO was the most influential dimension on ESA purchase behavior. Because Kuwaiti culture is characterized by a short-term orientation, Kuwaiti’s may be less likely to purchase ESA products. ESA is designed to help protect the environment against the long-term, negative effects. However, because environmental degradation is slow, the importance of protecting the environment is likely best supported by cultures with LTOs. Although this aspect of Kuwaiti culture cannot be changed, in the interviews the participants discussed purchasing clothing with health in mind. Therefore, by advertising the benefits of ESA for human health, retailers may be able to overcome the obstacle of a country oriented towards the short-term.

Kuwaiti culture’s lower levels of individualism and the influence of friends and family also affects ESA purchasing behavior. Therefore, ESA manufacturers and retailers should strongly consider the local customs and tastes when designing and selling ESA products in Kuwait. In this respect, a major influence on Kuwaiti communities is the Islamic religion. All the women reported that modesty was one of their biggest considerations when purchasing apparel. With these considerations in mind, ESA manufacturers and retailers should design and sell ESA that fits with the modesty standards of Kuwaiti culture.

High levels of clothing consumption within the Middle East correspond to high environmental impacts. Therefore, encouraging more sustainable consumption in the region is essential and further research should continue to focus on understanding ESA related behavior in this region.

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