Aiding consumers in responsible apparel shopping: Development of a model to evaluate corporate social responsibility

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Within the last 15 years, fast fashion has increased the apparel industry's environmental footprint and led consumers to view apparel as disposable (Hawley, 2015). Research indicates that especially Millennial and Generation Z consumer groups are aware of the problems related to the environmental and human impact of apparel products, and want to purchase apparel that is produced responsibly. However, their purchase behavior does not reflect this concern (Summer, 2015).

Lack of information about how products were made, and lack of trust that companies are telling the truth (i.e., lack of transparency) are two of the most common factors for the gap between consumer concern and purchase behavior (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2015). Apparel brands should include more information about their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices to improve transparency and build consumer trust, which can lead to more responsible consumer purchases (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2015). CSR is a company's ethical obligation toward stakeholders, which can include manufacturing practices, employment practices, and philanthropy with regard for the environment, society, and communities (Kunz, Karpova, & Garner, 2016). However, for consumers to be socially responsible, it might be difficult to find appropriate information and, even more critical, know what information is needed and what it means to evaluate the social responsibility of products and companies when they shop.

Tools exist for companies to assess their environmental and social impact. For example, the Higg Index helps companies evaluate product social responsibility throughout the apparel lifecycle (Kunz et al., 2016), and the Nike Making Application assists product developers with choosing environmentally friendly materials (Williams, 2015). These tools, however, are not suitable for consumer use as they are very complex, and require specialized knowledge. Currently there is no tool available for consumers to evaluate the CSR of apparel companies.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to *create a conceptual model for consumers with limited knowledge about the textile and apparel industry to evaluate the CSR of apparel companies quickly and easily when making purchase decisions*. Following Peloza and Shang's (2011) suggestions, CSR policies were simplified into three categories, and the conceptual model was developed to help consumers easily understand and evaluate: (a) product features as they relate to environmental sustainability throughout the apparel lifecycle, (b) company's business practices as they relate to human rights, and community development, and (c) philanthropical actions of companies that improve or give back to communities and people. Moreover, the model allows consumers to evaluate the transparency of the companies by assessing whether they do audits and report performance. Third party certifications were also included, because

they have been found to increase consumer trust in products in some previous research (Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle, & Lee, 2012). The model will be demonstrated and explained in detail during the conference presentation.

As a next step, we will pilot-test our conceptual model with a student sample to further investigate its usefulness, ease of use, and potential adaptability. For initial testing, consumers would have to use the online information available from apparel companies to assess their CSR. However, eventually a continuously updated database should be structured; similar to The Good Guide or Environmental Working Group databases available for consumers to evaluate personal care, cleaning, and food products for health and social responsibility.

The proposed model is the first step to create a tool for consumer evaluation of CSR when shopping for apparel products. It can be useful for educators in the classroom as well as consumers when making socially responsible purchase decisions. Potentially, an app could be developed where consumers could enter the information and view information that has been completed for different companies. This would create a database for consumers to evaluate the CSR of multiple apparel companies. Our model could also help consumers know how to evaluate CSR policies, so they can trust the information, which could lead to more consumer purchases of responsible apparel products.

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