

Exploring Consumers' Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed-Affiliated Products: A Conceptual Framework

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Background and Purpose: The textile and apparel industry, including fast fashion, has faced widespread criticism for its adverse environmental and social impacts, such as greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, and exploitative labor practices (Burgess & White, 2019). In response, some individuals and groups have embraced slow fashion, by focusing on ecological and social factors through small-scale, localized production using traditional craftsmanship (Burgess & White, 2019). Fibershed is one such organization that has emerged as an extension of the slow fashion movement, advocating for a localized and sustainable approach to textile and apparel production (Burgess & White, 2019). Central to this philosophy is the "Soil-to-Soil" (S2S) Framework, which envisions a closed-loop system operating within specific geographical limits, where various stakeholders along the supply chain, including farmers, ranchers, mill owners, designers, artisans, and cut and sew workers collaborate within the Fibershed network to produce sustainable apparel, referred to in this conceptual study as 'Fibershed-affiliated products.'

Retailers and consumers are an integral part of the apparel supply chain, playing crucial roles in the adoption of sustainable apparel. Retailers serve as links between producers and consumers, going beyond distribution to enhance supply chain efficiency, sustainability, and effectiveness (Jones et al., 2005). To this end, retailers, and particularly those that are local, can play an important role in the adoption of Fibershed-affiliated products by consumers. Typically comprised of small-scale establishments, local retailers serve their immediate communities and are seen as distinct from national chains or large corporations (Kim & Stoel, 2010). Consumers, as the intended users of the end product, have the power to influence retailers and manufacturers to adopt sustainable practices through demand (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Understanding the factors influencing consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products is crucial for the widespread adoption and success of the Fibershed model. Thus, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework to explore the factors that may influence consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework: Grounded in Social Practice Theory (SPT) (Shove et al., 2012), this study proposes a conceptual framework to examine the interplay of

materials (i.e., local retailers, Fibershed-affiliated products), competences (i.e., consumer awareness), and meanings (i.e., consumer values and perceptions) that shape the practice of consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products. SPT frames individuals as carriers of practices, shifting the focus from individual-centric approaches to the practices themselves, thereby offering a lens to understand the socio-cultural factors influencing sustainable behaviors embedded in daily human routines, and creating pathways towards the transitioning of societies to more sustainable ways of living (Shove et al., 2012).

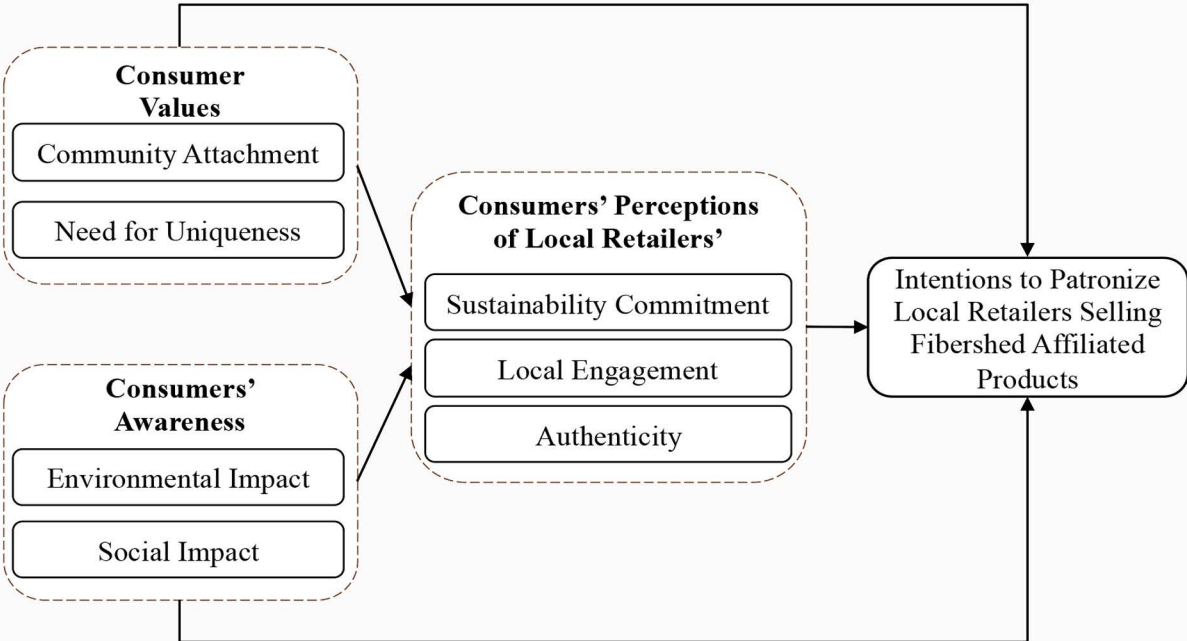
Prior studies indicate that consumers' values of community attachment (Wilson & Hodges, 2022), need for uniqueness (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Tian et al., 2001), and awareness of the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production (Diddi & Niehm, 2016) influence their perceptions of and behaviors towards retailers (Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Specifically, consumer values like community attachment, representing individuals' emotional bonds and social ties within their local community (Miller, 2001), influence their perceptions of retailers and their patronage behaviors (Wilson & Hodges, 2022). Consumers' need for uniqueness, encompassing nonconformity, distinctiveness, and self-expression (Tian et al., 2001), drives them to seek differentiated products and support sustainable and responsible consumption practices, such as prioritizing ethically made products and local businesses (Andrei et al., 2017). This need shapes consumers' perceptions (Lang & Armstrong, 2018) and behaviors towards local retailers (Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production, grounded in their values, beliefs, and understanding of the consequences of apparel production (Santos-Corrada et al., 2023), fosters positive perceptions and intentions towards sustainability (Hiller Connell, 2011) and specifically sustainable local retailers. Moreover, prior studies have established the relationship between consumer perceptions and their apparel consumption behaviors (Connell, 2011; Diddi & Niehm, 2016). Consumer perceptions of local retailers impact their patronage behavior. Local retailers' local engagement involves active community participation, establishing relationships, supporting local initiatives, and fostering trust and shared values (Skippari et al., 2017). Local retailers' commitment to sustainability reflects their adoption of responsible policies, transparent practices, and performance measurements emphasizing sustainability (Jones et al., 2005). Local retailers' authenticity emphasizes factors like heritage, originality, and social commitment, and is often used to uniquely position themselves against competitors (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022).

Thus, the conceptual model in Figure 1 proposes that consumer values of community attachment and need for uniqueness, and consumer awareness of the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production affect their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability, local engagement, and authenticity, as well as their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products. Moreover, the model posits that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' sustainability commitment, local engagement, and authenticity impact their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products.

Discussion and Implications: Interpreting the conceptual model through the lens of SPT, the

practice of intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products emerges from the integration of shared meanings around sustainability, as well as locality, community, authenticity, and need for uniqueness; materials like the local retailers and Fibershed-affiliated products; and competences such as consumer awareness of apparel industry impacts. This collective practice, reinforced by social interactions and community norms, shapes sustainable consumption behaviors. Simultaneously, from a supply chain perspective, Fibershed's prioritization of sustainable production aligns with the meanings and materials required for this sustainable practice to take root, while local retailers provide the community-focused materials. The reciprocal influence of sustainable production and consumption practices, underpinned by shared meanings, materials, and competences as posited by SPT, contributes to a more responsible apparel industry. By investigating the factors influencing consumers' intentions to patronize Fibershed-affiliated retailers, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the social practices that can facilitate broader industry efforts toward sustainable apparel production and align them with Fibershed's goals for sustainability. Further research is needed to empirically test the relationships proposed by the conceptual framework.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model



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