

The Future of Fashion Sustainability: A Qualitative Study on U.S. Millennials' Purchase Intention towards Sustainable Synthetic Athleisure Apparel

Jessica Ganak, Lauren Summers, Yi-Ning Tai, Olabisi Adesanya, and Ting Chi, Washington State University

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Introduction and literature review

Over the past few decades, the fashion industry has become synonymous with pollution and textile waste. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), roughly 15 million tons of textile waste (mainly used textiles and apparel) are generated in the U.S. every year (EPA, 2014). Approximately 84% of used textile and apparel could be repurposed, reused or recycled but ended up in landfills or were incinerated (EPA, 2014). As the fashion industry continues to be one of the major contributors to the environmental pollution, more and more initiatives are being implemented to combat it (Conca, 2015). Sustainable consumption has been increasingly argued as one of most impactful actions that individual consumers may take to reduce detrimental impact on the environment and demand offers of sustainable products from brands and retailers (Chi & Zheng, 2016; Ko & Jin, 2017).

Recent studies have strived to determine the factors that influence consumers' attitude or purchase intention toward sustainable apparel, however, most of the extant research have been focused on natural fibers or organic materials (Ellis et al., 2012). Scant research has been done on apparel made from recycled synthetic materials. Considering how prominent synthetic fibers are in apparel, accounting for approximately 60% of the materials used, it's vital to expand our knowledge on the consumers perception of recycled synthetic apparel products (Resnick, 2019).

Athleisure is casual, comfortable apparel designed to be suitable both for exercise and everyday wear (Watts & Chi, 2019). According to the Nike Product Development Group (NPD), athleisure accounts for 24% of total U.S. apparel sales in 2017 and is projected to continue to grow in the foreseeable future (NPD, 2018). The primary fibers used in athleisure apparel are synthetic materials. According to the MacKenzie corporation, the most prominent consumer segment who buys athleisure is females, ageing 18-34 (Who Is The Athleisure Consumer, 2016). This is why this market segment was chosen for this study.

While there are programs and initiatives striving to reduce environmental waste, offering consumers more eco-friendly options or ways to recycle their clothing, the still remains a gap in knowledge for consumers when it comes to synthetic fibers made from non-renewable resources.

The theoretical framework used is the perceived green value (PGV) a five-dimensional framework developed originally developed by Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) which considers; (1) functional, (2) social, (3) emotional, (4) conditional and (5) epistemic values which was used to analyze consumer intentions towards sustainable purchases (Sheth et al., 1991).

Method

This was a qualitative study involving a series of interviews with participants and an analysis of their results by coding their responses. The research method entailed the practice of snowball sampling in order to acquire 16 college-aged consumers to interview. These participants were college students from the Pacific Northwest region who were relatively aware of current sustainability initiatives within the apparel industry and those who frequently shopped for and wore athleisure products on a consistent basis. These interviews were conducted face-to-face or through phone calls. The interviews were voice recorded or transcribed directly onto electronic format. The interview questionnaire involved a series of semi-structured questions, so the respondents were given enough freedom to disclose their personal opinions on sustainable synthetic athleisure products.

Findings and Discussion.

Participants are motivated to purchase sustainable synthetic athleisure products for the following values which they perceived in sustainable shopping consumption: (1) functional value, (2) social value, (3) emotional value, (4) conditional value, and (5) epistemic value. Most of the participants claimed that they were aware that purchasing sustainable recycled products had a positive impact on the environment and the apparel industry as a whole. They expressed the concept of sustainable synthetic athleisure products to be innovative and a good way to minimize the overall pollution of the environment.

Many consumers view price is one of the biggest determinants when purchasing athleisure products, making the functional value of the utmost importance towards purchasing sustainable synthetic athleisure products. One significant finding under the functional value was that fit and comfort are two important features of sportswear that consumers expect in athleisure and products and would expect if paying more for sustainable synthetic athleisure. Consumers did express that they are willing to pay a higher premium (10-15% more) for these products if the quality is up to par compared to products sold from other brands. As far as the social value, consumers claim to shop at big name retailers including Nike, Lululemon, Adidas and Nordstrom for athleisure. This is mainly due to the fact that the quality of products they retail is widely known to be good among consumers. However, some claim brand name does not matter so long as the quality is good, in which case these consumers turn to retailers such as Amazon, Marshalls or Target. This opinion was split half and half among our participants.

The emotional value was tied along with the conditional value in terms of significance to consumers when considering to purchase sustainable synthetic athleisure. Consumers are attracted to sustainable apparel brands due to the values that they uphold (helping the environment, responsible CSR strategies, etc.). Participants expressed that they would stop purchasing from a particular brand if they went against certain values in a malicious way. Our respondents claim to play their part in terms of sustainable behaviors such as recycling and reducing consumption, but they feel they could improve their shopping behavior. All participants claimed that sustainable synthetic athleisure is an innovative product, expressing epistemic values towards the concept. However, this value alone is not a strong enough driver to influence purchase intention as only half of our respondents claim to follow trends closely.

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