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## Investigating the Role of Social Networking Sites in Creating Consumer Demand for Environmentally Sustainable Apparel: An Exploratory Study

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***Background and Purpose:*** Apparel and textile (AT) production finds itself the second leading industrial cause of environmental pollution. A majority of textile products have some type of a negative impact on the environment, whether it be through production, consumer use, or garment waste; and global textile consumption is equal to 30 million tons per year (Hiller Connell, in press). Therefore, increased consumer demand for environmentally sustainable apparel (ESA) is imperative.

Studies by Kinnear, Taylor, and Ahmed (1974) and Balderjahn (1998) suggest that when consumers are aware of the environmental issues associated with their behavior, they are much more likely to engage in behavior that is favorable towards the environment. Unfortunately, Hiller Connell (2010) outlines several factors limiting consumer engagement in ESA, including limited knowledge about and weak attitudes towards ESA.

Of the top 100 retailers, nearly 80% utilize Facebook and 70% Twitter as marketing tools (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011) and 96% of the global youth population is active on a social networking site (SNS), with the top sites being Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest (Consumer Instinct, 2012). Therefore, with increasing popularity of SNS, this study begins an exploration of how these sites may be leveraged to expand consumer demand for ESA. As researchers increase understanding of the social media platforms utilized by consumers and why consumers are using social media, we can also begin to identify how they use those sites to gain knowledge, to be influenced by peers, etc.

Drawing on Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), the purpose of this exploratory study is to initiate the investigation as to whether or not SNS may be a potential mechanism for increasing consumer demand for environmentally sustainable apparel. This exploration focuses on identifying consumer characteristics of social networking site users and investigating whether differences in consumer knowledge about environmental issues in apparel production leads to differences in attitudes about and ultimately purchase intentions of ESA. This study also examines whether or not the presence of social influence on SNS may serve as a mechanism to overcome the barriers (knowledge and attitudes) limiting consumer demand for ESA. The following research question bounded the study:

- Do social influence of SNS and subjective norms regarding purchasing ESA predict environmentally sustainable apparel purchase intentions beyond consumer knowledge about apparel related environmental issues and attitude towards environmentally sustainable apparel?

***Method:*** An anonymous national survey was conducted to collect responses from 783 participants. The survey utilized six previously developed scales, each measured on a 7-point Likert system. The variables measured in this study included knowledge about environmental issues in AT production, ESA attitudes, social influence of peers on SNS, the influence of SNS

systems on purchase behavior, subjective norm (including motivation to comply and normative beliefs regarding ESA), and ESA purchase intention. A hierarchical regression was conducted to understand if adding social influence of SNS as an additional component to Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) provides greater predictive power for ESA purchase behavior intentions.

**Findings:** Initial data analysis found all six scales reliable based on Cronbach's alpha. Therefore, in order to execute data analysis and determine relationships between variables, calculations of summed means occurred for each variable, as well as preliminary analysis to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. It was determined that it is possible to increase the prediction of ESA purchase intention through ES knowledge and ESA attitudes. The breakdown of  $B$  includes ES knowledge  $B=.03$ , ESA attitudes  $B=.21$ , ( $R^2=.48$ ,  $\Delta R^2=.48$ ,  $F=353.35$ ) influence of the SNS system  $B=-.00$ , peer influence on Facebook  $B=.03$ , peer influence on Twitter and Instagram  $B=.00$ , peer influence on Pinterest  $B=.03$ , subjective norm (motivation to comply)  $B=.02$ , subjective norm (normative beliefs)  $B=.17$  ( $R^2=.59$ ,  $\Delta R^2=.11$ ,  $F=34.61$ ). Therefore, it is also determined that social influence of SNS and subjective norms do not predict ESA purchase intentions better than knowledge and attitudes. However, the additional variables are significant additions to the TRA model in that, when combined with the variables of knowledge and attitudes, predicts ESA purchase intentions to a greater degree.

**Implications and Conclusions:** This research provides initial data focused on how SNS factor into an individual's subjective norms. As far as is known, no previous research has explored this relationship regarding purchase intention of ESA. This study contributes to the development of the Theory of Reasoned Action as the addition of these variables strengthens the TRA model, within the context of social networking sites, and future research should continue to examine these relationships. If ESA retailers can provide not only knowledge about environmental issues in the AT industry but also find ways to become influential "peers" on social networking platforms, findings from this study suggest ESA firms may, through subjective norms, increase consumers' intentions to purchase ESA. It is also necessary to note that consumers in general across the US have a very low knowledge of the environmental issues associated with apparel and textiles. SNS may be an effective place to provide that type of information based on the relationships between social media use and knowledge found in this study.

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