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Effect of fashion industry media on consumers attitudes and values for social responsibility.

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Introduction: Over the past several years, an abundance of research has been conducted on social issues in the apparel industry and its impact on consumer behavior. According to studies, consumer knowledge and concern with these issues have increased in recent years compared to the past (Kozar & Hiller Connell, 2013). According to Rudell (2006), the responsibility for prevention has majorly been assigned by consumers to manufacturers but, over time, has seen a shift to a combination of manufacturers and retailers, with consumers preferring an educational label indicating fair trade (Rudell, 2006). Dickson (2000) reported that negative perceptions about foreign issues in the industry led consumers to be more supportive of socially responsible business practices. Additionally, the more significant social values were to a consumer, the less suspicious they were of business intentions. Positive images of the U.S. apparel manufacturing industry led to lower perceived effectiveness scores in consumers (Dickson, 2000). However, recently there has been a rise in media content exposing the global manufacturing practices of major apparel and retail companies. Some of these resources are accurate whereas many of them are sensationalized for viewership. Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study is to examine the impact of viewing apparel manufacturing media on social responsibility beliefs of consumers. Eight variables were identified to assess social responsibility beliefs: knowledge, concern, the responsibility of prevention, possible solutions, foreign issues, suspicion of business intention, altruism, and perceived effectiveness.

Methodology: The underlying theoretical framework for this investigation was the attitudes, values, and behaviors relationships identified by Azjen and Fishbein (1980). Conceptually, individual reported attitudes and values toward an issue are good indicators of anticipated behavior. For this pilot-investigation, researchers collected a total of 45 online questionnaires using a convenience sample of college-aged students enrolled in fashion and business courses. The instrument used for this pilot study was a 38-question online survey evaluating consumer perception of social issues in the apparel manufacturing industry and purchase intention adapted from Dickson (2000). The survey included 19 items randomized to assess the aforementioned variables (a pre-test), followed by a ~2-minute video trailer of The True Cost documentary and randomized reverse-coded versions of each of the 19 questions (a post-test). Items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Due to the nature of this pilot investigation and the targeted convenience sample, researchers did not collect demographic information for the participants. However, all of the participants are currently enrolled college students enrolled in two courses: Visual Merchandising (fashion) and Strategic Brand Management (business).

Results: Data analysis included calculating total scale scores for each of the variables measured. Pre-test and posttest mean scores were compared for each of the eight variables and for the
overall social responsibility. The paired samples t-test indicated that, after viewing *The True Cost* documentary trailer, overall consumer social responsibility scores significantly increased. Specifically, the following variables indicated a significant difference increase: knowledge ($t(44) = -5.29, p<.001, d=.79$); concern ($t(44) = -4.47, p<.001, d=.66$); responsibility of prevention ($t(44) = -5.08, p<.001, d=.76$); possible solutions ($t(44) = -6.08, p<.001, d=.41$); and altruism ($t(44) = -4.34, p<.001, d=.65$). The difference figures are large according to Cohen’s (1988) guidelines. Two variables, foreign issues ($t(44) = -1.70, p<.10, d=.25$); and suspicion of business intentions ($t(44) = -1.42, p<.16, d=.21$), increased slightly, showing no significant difference.

While the other seven variables increased pre and post test, results for perceived effectiveness significantly decreased ($t(44) = 4.22, p<.001, d=.63$). The difference for this variable is considered large on Cohen’s guidelines (1988), as well.

**Discussion:** Survey respondents scored significantly higher on the posttest on all but three of the variables. After viewing *The True Cost* trailer, participants reported higher attitudes and values on apparel industry social responsibility, especially knowledge and concern about social issues in the apparel manufacturing industry. Participants delegated the responsibility of prevention differently and were more accepting of possible solutions, as well as more willing to make personal sacrifices in order to act in a socially responsible manner. Based on these results, documentaries, films, and other media pertaining to social issues in the apparel manufacturing industry may positively engage consumers and increase concern/awareness. Educational media, even when sensationalized, can inform and engage consumers on these issues, which could affect purchase behavior of consumers of apparel products manufactured in non-socially responsible facilities and geographic regions. Despite increased awareness and concern, an individual’s ability to effect change on the current situation significantly decreased. This finding indicates that consumers may feel they can make a difference until they are exposed to vastness and globalization indicative of the apparel manufacturing sector. Negative and globalized media portrayals may lead to feelings of helplessness when it comes to exercising one’s consumer buying power, further exacerbating the global issue of apparel manufacturing working conditions. Results are extremely limited in inference and generalizability due to the scope of this pilot study. However, some key issues were identified and further research is needed to investigate these relationships and the impact of media on social responsibility, especially decreasing individual perceived effectiveness on change.

**References:**

