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Sustainable Clothing: An Update on US College Student's Perceptions and Ethical Behavior

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Introduction and Research Background

The textile and apparel industry, an ideal exemplifier of global supply chain (Su, 2013), is characterized by the intense use of chemical products and natural resources, the significant issues with the generation of waste, and heavily criticized labor practices and conditions. The scale of environmental and social impacts from global textile and apparel production and consumption makes sustainability increasingly important in the contemporary business environment. Literature supports the assertion that knowledge is frequently a prerequisite to engaging in pro-environmental behaviors and that a lack of knowledge is a constraint (Connell, 2010). Moreover, studies have shown that values influence behavioral decisions and values, as abstract cognitions, serve as standards for attitudinal and behavioral processes (Ma & Lee, 2012). However, empirical research integrating consumer sustainability knowledge and their personal values in the sustainable apparel context is limited. This study utilizes the theory of reasoned action (TRA) by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and consumer value perspective (Schwartz, 1992) as theoretical framework (see Figure 1) and it focuses on college students' perceptions of and consumption behavior towards sustainable apparel products. Current college students are a large and powerful consumer segment with a long future of potential consumer decisions. They are especially socially concerned and aware of environmental, social, technological, and economic issues. This study provides an update on young US consumers' perceptions and ethical consumption behavior to industrial professionals.

Research Method

A survey instrument was designed based on a careful review of pertinent literature. Specifically, six items measuring consumer's sustainability knowledge about apparel products were obtained from Park and Kim (2016), using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). Consumers' personal values were measured using the 56 items that represent the 10 value types from the Schwartz value system (Schartz, 1992) on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from extremely unimportant (1) to extremely important (5). Consumer attitude towards sustainable apparel products was assessed using four items adapted from Ma and Lee (2012). Consumer's willingness to buy was measured by three items adopted from Sweeney et al (1999). Data were collected in February 2017 at a midsize university in the southeast U.S. Four hundred and eighty-five responses were received and 459 are valid for this study. Of the valid 459 responses, 46% were from male and 53% were from female; 51% were 18-20 years old and 44% were 21-25 years old. The most prevalent ethnic group was Caucasian (46%), followed by African-American (28%), Asian (14%) and Hispanic (6%).

Data Analysis and Results

Structural equation modeling approach was used to examine the research model. Evaluation of the measurement model was conducted using confirmatory factor analysis. Multiple fit indexes were used to examine the model fit. An acceptable fit was achieved for the measurement model (see Table 1). The analysis of structural model supports the relationships in the model, demonstrating that consumer's sustainability knowledge and personal value positively and significantly impact consumer attitude toward sustainable apparel products; and consumer attitude impacts willingness to buy sustainable clothing (see Figure 1, which includes standardized parameter estimates and t-values). Thus, this study provides updated empirical evidence of the importance of consumer's sustainability knowledge in shaping favorable consumer attitude towards sustainable clothing, and reveals the positive impact of consumer's personal value on consumer attitude. In addition, it confirms the positive relationship between consumer attitude and willingness to buy sustainable apparel products. The study offers insights to the apparel industry in developing potential consumer segment for expanding sustainable apparel market.

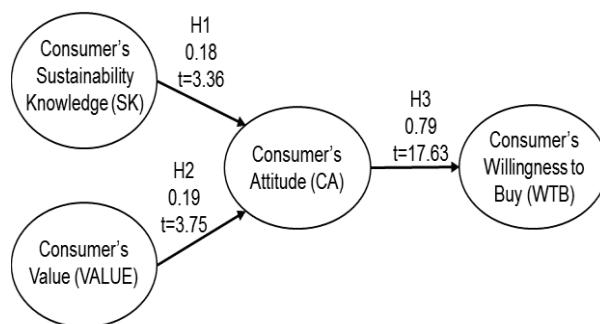


Figure 1. Research model.

Fit Indices	Value
Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation	0.090
Normed Fit Index	0.91
Nonnormed Fit Index	0.92
Comparative Fit Index	0.93
Composite Reliability	
Sustainability Knowledge	0.83
Consumer Value	0.91
Consumer Attitude	0.92
Willingness to Buy	0.87

Table 1. Fit indices of the measurement model

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