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Sustainability: What does it mean to you?

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Sustainability has become the new buzzword that is being addressed by different stakeholders in the society. Apparel industry has been criticized extensively with regards to the environmental and social impacts that have on the society's well-being. Apparel brands have been introducing environmentally friendly materials in their line as well as embracing ethical practices in their supply chain to overcome this criticism (D'Souza & Taghian, 2005). In addition, there has been an increasing trend of greater consumer awareness of environmental and social issues. Cone (2012) states that almost 90% of U.S. consumers claim some change in their buying behavior based on what is sustainable.

With myriad definitions of sustainability provided by apparel brands, retailers and media, little is known of how consumers perceive this concept. It is imperative to know the perceptions of sustainability among consumers as these form their motivations to embrace related products (Gam, 2011). The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the meaning of sustainability that consumers construe both in general and apparel industry specific. Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, integrating all three dimensions of sustainability – environment, social and economic, was used to guide this study.

An online survey was designed asking participants to list first five keywords/phrases about sustainability in general as well as apparel industry specific. This method was used so that the meaning of sustainability could be captured without influencing their choice of words by giving options. The survey link was sent to a convenience sample of students and all faculty and staff at one U.S. mid-western university. The sample represented a good mix of consumers like young adults, mid-career and seasoned professionals in the university setting. Within two weeks periods in 2012, 370 usable responses were retained for data analysis. Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes from each participant.

The survey participants were predominantly White (90.3%) followed by Asian (5.8%), American Indian/Alaskan native (0.6%), Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (0.3%), and other (2.9%). Among the participants, females and males were 71.1% and 28.9%, respectively. Approximately half of the respondents (54.6%) were faculty or staff and the rest were students (45.4%). Interestingly, 37.7% of the participants had a graduate degree and 28.8% had an associate degree. Participants were primarily young, in the age group of 18-25 (38.5%), followed by respondents aged between 26-34 (17.1%), 35-44 (11.9%), 45-54 (13.5%), and 55 and above (19%).

Perceptions about sustainability in general. A total of 1,552 key phrases were analyzed in this category. Fifty themes were developed based on the data and categorized under environmental,

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economic and social dimensions of sustainability. The most popular keywords/phrases regarding the perceptions of sustainability in general were “green” (206 responses). At least 122 responses used the word “environment” or its synonyms (e.g., nature, natural, trees) or an analogous phrase (e.g., climate, water) followed by 98 phrases related to “recycle or recycling,” 58 keywords used “renewable or bio renewable,” 53 phrases used “energy or energy efficient” and 46 responses used “reuse or reusable.” In sum, 1,409 keywords were categorized under environmental dimension followed by 99 keywords under the social dimension, and 49 keywords under the economic dimension.

Perception about sustainability specific to apparel and textiles. A total of 1,609 keywords/phrases were analyzed. We could see a marked difference in how participants responded to sustainability specific to apparel and textiles versus as in general terms. The most popular keywords/phrases (206) had the prefix of “re” (e.g., recyclable, reuse, resale, repurpose, renewable, reduce). The responses also exuded participants’ thoughts about natural and organic fibers. Responses could be differentiated broadly as nouns where in 129 responses actually associated sustainability in apparel and textiles with specific examples of textile fibers such as organic cotton, bamboo, hemp, linen, silk and wool. Two hundred two responses were more in adjective form using the words “eco-friendly, eco, organic and natural.” Almost 71 responses associated “donating clothes, vintage, second hand, goodwill and locally produced with sustainability.” Responses pertaining to the social dimension of sustainability in apparel and textiles consisted of themes primarily on social well-being of workers. Some of the popular phrases used to describe this dimension included “labor, sweatshop, fair trade, wages, worker rights, ethical and justice.” Overall, 1,376 keywords/phrases were categorized under the environmental dimension followed by 176 keywords/phrases under the social dimension and 57 keywords/phrases under the economic dimension.

The results of this study show that consumers’ understanding of sustainability tends to lean towards environmental aspects rather than social or economic dimensions. Furthermore, in terms of the apparel industry specific numerous responses focused on either reuse-recycle or use of eco-friendly fibers in the products. This indicates that it matters to consumers (a) the raw materials used in the process of apparel and textiles manufacturing and (b) the effect of its disposal on environment. The findings of this study would eventually lead apparel manufacturers and retailers to design sustainable products and marketing strategies, as well as providing future directions for sustainability scholarship in the apparel and textiles discipline.

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