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An Exploration of Millennial Consumers' Perceptions of Social Responsibility Product Attributes: USA Made vs. Foreign Made Apparel

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Introduction. Today's globalized economy represents a very complex system, with a great deal of production having shifted outside of the USA, especially that of apparel and textiles. Although the literature thoroughly addresses consumer behavior and country-of-origin (COO) effects, few studies explore consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding social responsibility (e.g., the obligation to consider the welfare of society at large) as related to COO. Millennials, the largest consumer group in U.S. history, have enormous buying power, thus studying them is of great interest. This research aims to explore Millennial consumers' perceptions of socially responsible product attributes (SRPA) (i.e. no sweat label, fair wages, safe work environment, etc.) and the decision-making process of purchasing USA Made versus Foreign Made apparel.

Related Literature and Research Questions. The USA manufacturing sector has become more globally competitive bringing countless benefits to re-shoring companies, and studies discuss consumers' perceived benefits of purchasing USA Made products, such as positive affective states and helping the domestic economy (Karr, 2014). Furthermore, depending on consumers' perceived value of sustainability, studies have found COO to impact consumers' price perceptions and purchase decisions (Ha-Brookshire, 2012). This COO effect may carry over to consumers' social responsibility concerns in the domestic versus international context (i.e. domestically, stabilizing the economy and jobs; intentionally, helping advance developing countries and working toward a greater good). The consumer group in question, Millennials, is characterized by world-mindedness, information empowerment, and greater awareness of sustainability issues (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Yet, the literature reports mixed results regarding Millennials' ethical purchase behaviors, with some studies reporting positive purchase intentions toward ethical products (e.g., Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012), and others finding an intention-behavior gap. Considering these contradicting assessments, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: *To what extent does social responsibility product attributes have an impact on Millennial consumers' purchase decisions of apparel products?*

RQ2: *What socially responsible product attributes are of utmost importance to Millennial consumers when it comes to choosing USA Made Apparel vs. Foreign Made Apparel?*

Methods. This study explored Millennial consumers' perceptions of SRPA that weight in their decision-making when purchasing apparel products. A focus group was conducted (N=8), using snowball sampling where the participants were university students between the ages of 18 and 35. The sample size was deemed appropriate for this exploratory study intended to shape future research. Focus group questions centered on apparel product attributes, which contribute to

purchase decisions, the influence of the “Made in” label, and perceptions of USA Made versus Foreign Made apparel. Qualitative data analysis identified themes in the participants’ responses. For stability and reproducibility in coding the data, two of the researchers individually read and coded the data set and further collaborated to extend and refine this coding system. Agreement was achieved between the two researchers through negotiation prior to completing code checks.

Results. Consistent with some of the literature, participants reported some concern about social responsibility in apparel products. In addressing RQ1, most participants’ purchase decisions were informed by the perceived social responsibility of an apparel product, to a limited degree. Yet, the participants expressed some skepticism where traditional product attributes (TPA) (i.e. price, quality, and fit) were more important in the decision-making process. To address RQ2, across both USA and Foreign Made apparel products, participants were not willing to sacrifice TPAs for a product that is socially responsible. Once TPAs were satisfied, most participants considered placing more emphasis on the greater good to be of higher importance than supporting the domestic economy. Our results indicated that Millennial consumers have divided views and associate different product attributes with USA Made versus Foreign Made apparel products. Foreign Made products were considered socially responsible in that their production supports the marginalized workforce overseas. This perception was considered more important to participants than the socially responsible characteristics of USA Made apparel products.

Discussion, Future Research, and Implications. Millennial consumers were specifically interested in satisfying TPAs (i.e. price, quality and fit) before they were willing to consider the social responsibility aspect of either USA or Foreign Made apparel products. However, when it came to choosing a USA Made vs. Foreign Made apparel product, their world-mindedness overshadowed concerns about the domestic economy. Prior research suggest that when consumers see a USA Made product versus a Foreign Made product, they may perceive the USA product to be of a higher quality and value (Ha-Brookshire, 2012). The contradicting findings of this exploratory study and the relevant literature warrant further investigation of Millennial consumers’ complex consumption preferences. Future studies should consider the potential of social desirability bias and examine the moral dilemmas (e.g. Marks & Mayo, 1991). Furthermore, future studies should examine a larger sample with a balanced gender and a wider array of Millennials (i.e. non college students, varied ethnicity, and geographic locations).

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