

Educating young consumers: the challenge for textile and apparel companies

Alberta Bernardi, Ph.D. Candidate, Management and Innovation, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart

alberta.bernardi@unicatt.it

(+ 39) 02-72342426

Department of Economics and Business Management Sciences

Catholic University of the Sacred Heart

7 Via Lodovico Necchi, Floor 5

Milan, MI 20123

Italy

Abstract

In the decade of action, sustainability is a selling point, and companies have to consider it in order to stay competitive and alive. The textile and apparel industry is one of the most polluting and exploiting sectors in the world, reason why it is pressured by stakeholders and consumers to act and produce sustainably. In particular, consumers ask forcefully for sustainable apparel but, in the end, they often do not buy what companies produce.

Literature has widely highlighted the existence of a gap between the attitude towards sustainable fashion product consumption (SFPC) and the actual purchase behavior. Among the several explanations of this gap, the perceived risk may be one of the most significant barriers for consumers when it comes to buying sustainable apparel, and companies have to face it. One way to face the perceived risk is to educate consumers with effective communication strategies and means, such as the hang tags.

Based on the Perceived Risk Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the SFPC by expanding the knowledge of young consumer behavior in the market for sustainable apparel with ecological and social characteristics. In order to do so, this paper considers the hang tags as means that fashion companies can use to effectively educate young consumers through a specific and quick communication of sustainable apparel characteristics.

Data are collected with an online and self-administered questionnaire. The sample is composed of young people because they figure centrally in addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study presents the first set of data collected and allows a better understanding of factors determining consumer behavior towards sustainable apparel. This paper has implications for both researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, sustainable fashion, perceived risk, hang-tag, communication, TPB

1. Introduction

Primarily after the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set in 2015 by the United Nations and intended to be achieved by 2030, the interest for sustainability has got the attention of academics and industrials in all sectors. Defined as the meeting of present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need¹, sustainability has become a selling point and the key to staying competitive because stakeholders, customers, regulators, and researchers are fostering companies to change their production systems in favor of major sustainability². As stated in 1997 by Elkington³ in the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory, to be considered sustainable, the companies are required to pursue environmental, social and economic goals jointly.

In particular, after several scandals and due to its highly polluting impacts along its supply chain, the textile and apparel industry is one of the most challenged sectors by sustainability⁴. For decades, textile and apparel companies have been criticized for their unsustainable way to act that is having negative impacts both on the environment and on the society, while producing huge economic returns. In the past, sustainability was intended as the reuse and the recycling of materials, and it was a need; instead, nowadays, sustainable behaviors are the result of a conscious lifestyle and increasingly informed choices.

The need for a more sustainable fashion system took on greater importance after the Rana Plaza accident, becoming increasingly mainstream. The collapse of Rana Plaza factory - Bangladesh, 24th of April 2013 - killed more than 1000 people and marked an increased interest in sustainability and ethical practices in the textile and apparel industry⁵. From that moment on, textile and apparel companies began very exposed to sustainability pressures, and the relevance of the social dimension for fashion brands has radically increased⁶.

Although most textile and apparel companies have started to reorganize their activities in order to reduce their impacts to satisfy the consumers' requests, quite often, these requests are not followed by actual purchase behaviors. As a consequence of the described phenomenon, also known as "sustainable fashion paradox"⁷, the upper-side of the textile and apparel supply chain is turning sustainable, while the opposite side is not.

Literature has widely highlighted the gap between the attitude towards sustainable fashion product consumption (SFPC) and the actual purchase behavior. The attitude-behavior gap could be due to the risk that consumers perceive when they think and shop for sustainable fashion products. According the literature review carried out by Kim and Lennon⁸, apparel purchasing has been associated with higher levels of perceived risk than other consumer products.

¹ WECD, The Brundtland Report.

² Melander, "Customer and supplier collaboration", 677-693.

³ Elkington, *Cannibals with Forks*.

⁴ Majumdar and Sinha, "Analyzing the barriers of green textile supply chain", 176-187.

⁵ Henninger et al., "What is sustainable fashion?", 400-416.

⁶ Seuring and Müller, conceptual framework for sustainable supply chain, 1699-1710.

⁷ Han et al., "Staging luxury experiences", 162-167.

⁸ Kim and Lennon, "Television shopping for apparel in the United States", 301-331.

Perceived risk can be one of the most significant barriers for consumers when it comes to buying sustainable apparel, and companies have to face it. One way to face the risk is to educate consumers with effective communication strategies and means. Hang tags could be a way to communicate and show consumers what they are buying immediately.

Based on the Perceived Risk Theory⁹ and the Theory of Planned Behavior¹⁰, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the SFPC by expanding the knowledge of young consumer behavior in the market for sustainable apparel with ecological and social characteristics. In order to do so, this paper considers the hang tags as tools that textile and apparel companies can use to effectively educate young consumers through a specific and quick communication of garments characteristics.

Through this study, the author wants to contribute to a better understanding of the sustainability awareness, perceived risk, attitudes and purchasing intentions of today's young consumers. In the next paragraph, the literature review is presented, then follow the methodology and the presentation of the first set of data collected.

The sample is composed of young Italian people; data are collected through an online and self-administered questionnaire. The results allow a better understanding of factors determining consumer behavior towards sustainable apparel and suggest practical solutions to producers.

2. Theoretical background

Today's consumers are aware of the impact of their purchasing decisions¹¹. Since the late 1990s, the numerous scandals surfaced in the textile and fashion panorama have led to a growing interest in sustainability showed by the consumption side of the textile and apparel supply chain, as such putting significant pressure on fashion companies and retailers to take action and implement sustainable alternatives along their supply chains¹².

Consequently, the interest in sustainability was soon making its mark in the consumer behavior literature, and many studies examined consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion products and their final purchase decisions¹³. Interestingly, most of those studies found that even though consumers, generally, have positive attitudes toward sustainable products, they often end up not purchasing sustainable products, and their actual consumption behaviors poorly reflect such responsibility toward the environment and society. The discrepancy between consumer attitude and their actual behavior, or the "attitude-behavior gap", is a constant state of psychological imbalance between the sustainability concerns and the actual sustainable fashion product consumption (SFPC)¹⁴, and this is causing several issues to textile and apparel companies.

Indeed, as consumers' demand for sustainable products continues to explode, an

⁹ Bauer, "Consumer behavior as risk taking", 23-33.

¹⁰ Ajzen, "The theory of planned behavior", 179-211.

¹¹ Kim and Chung, "Consumer purchase intention", 40-47.

¹² Cherrafi et al., "Lean, green practices and process innovation", 79-92.

¹³ Shen et al., "Consumers' awareness of sustainable fashion", 134-147.

¹⁴ Han et al., "Staging luxury experiences", 162-167.

increasing number of apparel companies have responded by modifying their product design, development, and sourcing strategies to incorporate sustainable practices. Therefore, since the sustainable demand suggests a sustainable consumption at the end of the textile and apparel supply chain, the upstream processes – from sourcing, production, to distribution – are turning sustainable to satisfy consumers' needs and expectations¹⁵. However, it seems that the same is not happening to the opposite side of the supply chain, but of course, to reach the aim of a sustainable industry, sustainable consumption is an essential component¹⁶.

As textile and apparel companies are required to turn sustainable to stay competitive and alive, they have to develop marketing plans and tools to educate their consumers to trust sustainability, sustainable products and to buy sustainable apparels¹⁷. The Theory of Planned Behavior and the Perceived Risk Theory could help filling in the attitude-behavior gap.

2.1. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Among the most popular models explaining the attitude-behavior gap, there is the Theory of Reasoned Action¹⁸ (TRA) that links attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, and behavior into a fixed causal sequence¹⁹. The TRA's evolution is the Theory of Planned Behavior²⁰ (TPB, Figure 1) that emerged after the TRA was extended to perceived behavioral control, namely the behaviors that individuals cannot fully control. These classic theories have been extensively adopted to explain consumer behavior towards sustainable products, including clothing²¹.

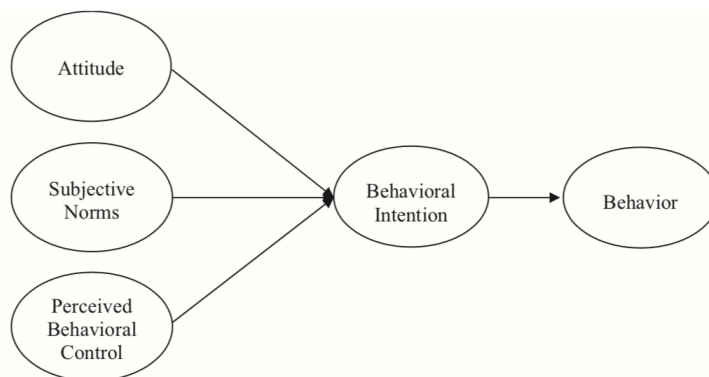


Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

According to TPB, an individual's intention to behave in a certain way can be explained by the attitudes towards that specific behavior, the perceptions about social pressure (i.e., subjective norm) and the perceptions about the difficulty of the behavior (i.e.,

¹⁵ Chan and Wong, "The consumption side of sustainable fashion supply chain", 193-215.

¹⁶ Niinimäki, "Eco-clothing, consumer identity and ideology", 150-62.

¹⁷ Hyllegard et al., "Socially responsible labeling", 51-66.

¹⁸ Ajzen and Fishbein, *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*

¹⁹ Koszewska, "Understanding consumer behavior", 43-94.

²⁰ Ajzen, "The theory of planned behavior", 179-211.

²¹ Koszewska, "Understanding consumer behavior", 43-94.

perceived behavioral control) in a causal sequence²². Attitudes, subjective (or social) norms and/or behavioral control were found to be valid constructs for predicting environmentally sustainable and ethical consumer behaviors such as purchasing of fair-traded apparel²³.

2.2. Perceived risk

The notion of “perceived risk” was introduced by Bauer²⁴ in 1960, and since then, it has been a significant interest to many researchers in the field of consumer behavior. Cox and Rich²⁵ defined it as “the nature and amount of risk perceived by a consumer in contemplating a particular purchase decision”. Perceived risk is known to play an essential role in attitude formation toward a product purchase: larger risk is associated with a more negative attitude²⁶.

Perceived risk is generally measured as a multidimensional construct, which includes the following aspects: financial, performance, social, psychological, physical, and time/convenience risk.

Kim and Lennon²⁷ stated that apparel purchasing has been associated with higher levels of perceived risk than other consumer products. Following Han and Chung²⁸, social risk was not included in the current study because it overlaps with subjective norms in TPB as both constructs are closely related to the influences of others during the purchase process.

With textile and apparel industry finding itself a leader in social and environmental sustainability issues, the call to action to influence purchase intention by supplying a base of knowledge to consumers is crucial, and it can potentially lead to a change of attitude and in purchase intention²⁹. However, reaching the changing consumer knowledge and attitudes towards sustainable apparel is challenging; in this scenario, labeling can be an effective and consumer-friendly mean for communicating the attributes of sustainable clothing³⁰.

2.3. Hang tags and communication

Since this study wants to contribute to understand how textile and apparel companies can educate young consumers to purchase sustainable garments overcoming the attitude-behavior gap, the communication is here intended as an effective mean to reach this goal. Following Hyllegard et al.³¹, the hang tags are here considered as the way companies can use to immediately communicate their environmental and social commitment to consumers.

²² Kang et al., “Environmentally sustainable textile and apparel consumption”, 442-452.

²³ Halepete et al., “Personalization of fair trade apparel”, 143-160.

²⁴ Bauer, “Consumer behavior as risk taking”, 23-33

²⁵ Cox and Rich (p. 33), “Perceived risk and consumer decision making”, 32-39.

²⁶ Eastlick and Feinberg, “Differences in attitudes”, 220-226.

²⁷ Kim and Lennon, “Television shopping for apparel in the United States”, 301-331.

²⁸ Han and Chung, “Korean consumers’ motivations and perceived risks”, 235-250.

²⁹ Copeland, “Media strategies impacting millennials’ sustainable apparel purchase intention”.

³⁰ Koszewska, “Understanding consumer behavior”, 43-94.

³¹ Hyllegard et al., “Socially responsible labeling”, 51-66.

As reported by Hyllegard et al.³², in the past, textile and apparel companies have used hang tags to convey brand name, build brand identity, educate consumers about product attributes, inform consumers about a company's mission and ethos, and reinforce both product labeling and advertising; more recently, hang tags are used to emphasize the commitment to the environment, fair labor, education, and other social causes. In the cited study, guidelines are given to academics and practitioners about how hang tags should be composed in order to educate consumers and communicate sustainability effectively. Examples are: explicitness of the information provided, no vague terms, use of explicit messages and logos.

The present paper tries to use the hang tags as a mean not only able to influence the purchase intention, but also to reduce the perceived risk that, inevitably, increases the attitude-behavior gap with which textile and apparel companies are struggling. The latter represents the main hypothesis within the proposed model (Figure 2).

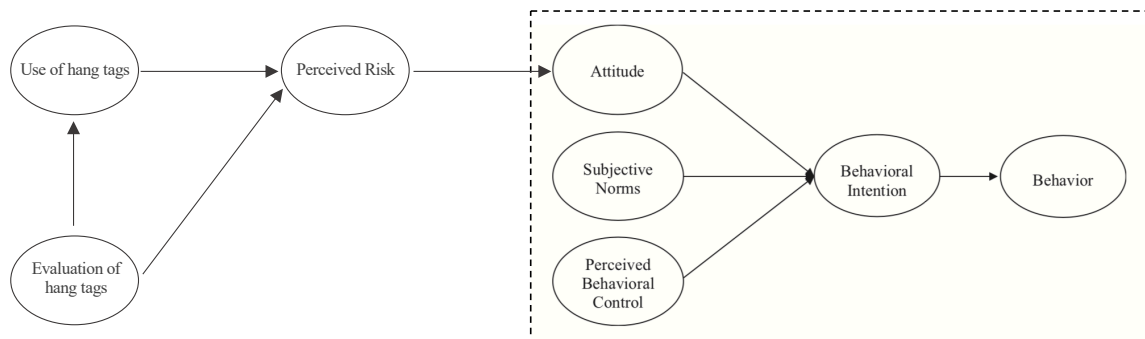


Figure 2: The proposed model (Author's elaboration)

3. Methodology

This paper wants to contribute to a better understanding of the SFPC by expanding the knowledge of young consumers behavior and combining their sustainability awareness (i.e., the use and evaluation of hang tags) with the risk they perceive, and with their attitudes, behavioral control, social norms, and purchasing intentions.

After the literature review presented in the previous paragraph, the author designed an online self-administered questionnaire consisting of constructs and variables that are measured by using scales validated by relevant literature. The following are the constructs that compose the questionnaire:

1. Use of hang tags
2. Evaluation of hang tags
3. Perceived risk
4. Attitude
5. Perceived behavioral control
6. Subjective norms
7. Intention to purchase

All the items are assessed through a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". This study collects data from a sample of young people (age range:

³² Hyllegard et al., "Socially responsible labeling", 51-66.

from 18 to 24) because they figure centrally in addressing the SDGs, they are the most aware of the sustainable fashion concerns, but at the same time, they often cannot afford such purchase.

Data collection is still in progress; at the moment, the dataset is composed of 277 responses all of them are from Italy. The preliminary results of the first set of data are presented in the next section through the use of descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation and correlation matrix.

4. Descriptive statistics and discussion

Since the data collection is still in progress, in this section the sample composition and some descriptive statistics are presented. As shown in figure 3, out of 277 respondents, 268 were female (96,8%); the 51% of the sample has a high school degree and the 82% is currently studying. The data compositions of the education level and the employment status, are due to the young age of the respondents (from 18 to 24 years).



Figure 3: Sample composition (Author's elaboration)

Figure 4 shows that, apparently, young consumers do not perceive a high level of risk when they buy or think about buying sustainable garments (mean 2 out of 5). The mean of "Attitude" (4,47) is higher than the mean of "Intention" (3,88), and this seems to confirm the attitude-behavior gap above discussed. The social pressure (i.e., "Subjective

norms”) perceived by young consumers seems not to be so strong (mean= 1,82) especially if compared with their own attitude. The latter evidence shows that, apparently, young consumers are convinced that buy sustainably is a good behavior regardless of the social pressure they may be exposed to. The mean of “Use” (3,36) and “Evaluation” (3,71) are quite high and they seem to show that young consumers are inclined to take the hang tags into consideration.

	Use	Evaluation	Perceived risk	Attitude	Behavioral control	Subjective norms	Intention
Mean	3,36	3,71	2,00	4,47	2,93	1,82	3,88
Median	3,38	3,73	1,93	4,57	3	1,67	4
Mode	3	4	2	5	3	1	5
Standard deviation	0,80	0,55	0,49	0,56	0,85	0,83	0,97
Sample variance	0,64	0,31	0,24	0,31	0,72	0,70	0,93
Kurtosis	-0,44	0,18	0,32	1,88	-0,31	-0,10	0,24
Skewness	-0,34	-0,64	0,74	-1,21	0,28	0,78	-0,82
Count	277	277	277	277	277	277	277

Figure 4: Descriptive statistics (Author’s elaboration)

The correlation matrix (figure 5) shows that the “Use of hang tags” and the “Perceived risk” are negatively correlated, and this suggests that the aim of the study to consider the “Use of hang tags” as a tool to reduce the “Perceived risk” of consumers may be coherent. The same does not seem to hold for the “Evaluation of the hang tags”: at present, this variable and the “Perceived risk” have a positive correlation. At the same time, the “Perceived risk” is negatively correlated with “Attitude”, “Behavioral control” and “Intention”; the “Use of hang tags” and the “Evaluation of hang tags” are positively correlated to each other and with all the other variables, coherently with the main results of the Theory of Planned Behavior.

	Use of hang tags	Evaluation of hang tags	Perceived risk	Attitude	Perceived behavioral control	Subjective norm	Purchase intention	Level of study
Use of hang tags	1							
Evaluation of hang tags	0,213	1						
Perceived risk	-0,017	0,079	1					
Attitude	0,366	0,368	-0,083	1				
Perceived behavioral control	0,383	0,215	-0,211	0,342	1			
Subjective norm	0,207	0,124	0,201	0,197	0,227	1		
Intention	0,434	0,208	-0,133	0,462	0,604	0,251	1	
Level of study	0,118	0,071	-0,085	0,134	0,072	0,025	0,035	1

Figure 5: Correlation matrix

Conclusions

As stated above, in today's business world, sustainability is a selling point for all the sectors, and it is a mandatory factor included in the Agenda 2030. Consequently, textile and apparel companies know that to stay competitive and alive they have to develop sustainable products and production systems, but at the same time they have to educate their consumers to trust sustainability, sustainable products and to buy sustainable apparels³³. This is due to the attitude-behavior gap – a psychological imbalance between the positive attitude towards sustainable purchases and the actual purchase behaviors – which is particularly strong and problematic within the textile and apparel industry³⁴.

This study wants to contribute to literature providing implications on how to motivate sustainable fashion product consumption (SFPC), with a specific focus on young consumers. Consequently, following previous studies (e.g., Chan and Wong³⁵) this study aims at offering a new perspective to show how marketers might educate contemporary consumers to become more strongly oriented toward SFPC. In particular, this study considers a marketing tool, the hang tags, as a way to lower the risk they might perceive in purchasing sustainable clothes and, at the same time, to enhance their positive attitude towards the sustainable fashion consumption. The descriptive statistics of the first set of data collected seem to provide consistency of the model developed above, and highlight the role of the "Use of hang tags" as a valid tool to reduce the consumers' "Perceived risk" that, in turn, might reduce the "Attitude" to buy sustainably.

If sustained by appropriate quantitative analysis, the findings of this work may be of real interest to marketers and practitioners in the textile and apparel industry that want to achieve the goal of educating not only their current customers but also all those potentials clients too "scared" to ride the wave of sustainability.

Limits and future development

The major limit of this paper is the small size of the sample. Also, considering only one Country could not make the generalizability of the results so easy. At present, the sample is composed of the 96,8% of female, which may represent another bias. Future developments will consist in expanding the sample and, consequently, in analyzing and comparing more Countries in order to highlight further demographic aspects such as culture and ethnicity. Moreover, further quantitative analysis will be required to sustain the preliminary indication of the descriptive statistics analysis.

³³ Hyllegard et al., "Socially responsible labeling", 51-66

³⁴ Han et al. 2016, "Staging luxury experiences", 162-167.

³⁵ Chan and Wong, "The consumption side of sustainable fashion supply chain", 193-215.

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