Consumer Behaviors Regarding Sustainability that affect Demands Shaping
Corporate Social Responsibility Policies in Fashion and Hospitality Industries

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Sustainable development (SD) is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Kapferer & Michault, 2015, p. 5). In 2012, the United Nations explicated its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to serve as a framework for transitioning to more sustainable global systems. In the years since, apparel companies have increasingly prioritized the SD as a major operational activity across their organizations' entire value chains (i.e., sourcing, creating, manufacturing, logistics, distribution, marketing, servicing, waste, recycling), with many firms adopting the triple bottom line (i.e., people, planet, profit) approach to value creation (Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2015). Despite a growing commitment to SD, overproduction and resource exploitation persist and the clothing industry remains the second most polluting global industry (Ertekin & Atik, 2015).

Literature Informing Course Learning Objectives

The literature (e.g., Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Sadachar et al., 2016) extensively documents the need for increased consumer awareness on sustainability, as knowledge is an antecedent to behavioral change. The UN also documents the importance of consumer education through SDG #12 in the form of adequate and transparent information about the effect of consumption and disposition behaviors (Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.). Hopkinson and Cronin (2015) suggest "that long-term change, such as that needed for sustainability, arises through the linked actions of organizations and consumers" (p.1384). Arguably, consumers are not sufficiently educated about CSR to advocate for marketplace change (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), a necessary step to transition to a collective sustainability-oriented identity within the fashion system (Ertekin & Atik, 2015). Although many touchpoints for consumer education exist, it is particularly important for collegiate programs that prepare students for careers in consumer-facing industries (e.g., retail, hospitality) to incorporate SD and CSR education across all courses in their curriculums (Cavender et al., 2019). This teaching paper documents one professor's experience with developing and implementing CSR instruction into a university course.

Students in a senior-level, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) course were presented with an opportunity to learn about aspects of consumer sovereignty, the notion that consumers have power to shape not only the products and services that are available in the marketplace, but also the power to shape CSR policies. The assignment was developed to support the following course learning objectives: (1)

analyze and evaluate diverse perspectives of <u>multiple stakeholders</u> in negotiating socially responsible business practices and (2) compare and contrast sustainable strategies used in <u>fashion retail and hospitality</u> industries. For this particular course, student learning challenges included the influence of the spring 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic that required all formerly face-to-face classes to move online for the remainder of the semester. This "consumer demand" module was scheduled to occur during the mandated "newly online" portion of the semester. Therefore, an engaging way to enhance students' online learning was sought.

<u>Teaching Module and Theoretical Framework</u>

With an eye toward the above noted course learning objectives, the instructional module was created to emphasize that a) consumers are among the important stakeholders in CSR and b) both the fashion and hospitality industries (which reflected the majors of 87.5% of the course population's students) are key industries where sustainable strategies are needed and achievable.

We employed the theory of constructivist learning (Dewey, 1916) which posits that students start with knowledge based on their own unique experience and are able to gain new knowledge most effectively when they can build upon their previous knowledge and experiences with action-oriented strategies. As a result, the goals of this learning module were to: (a) engage newly online students, (b) teach consumer sovereignty, (c) provide students with data-informed insights about their own consumer attitudes and behaviors that in turn inform them of the consumer sovereignty concepts that shape CSR, and (d) ensure that students have take-a-ways about how they can transition to leaders in the industry who are positioned to educate consumers and provide pathways for consumers to support CSR initiatives.

A pre-module online survey was given to the students for the purpose of examining their own consumer behavior related to social responsibility and sustainability. This survey, answered by 80 students, gave students the opportunity to think and report about their own attitudes and behaviors to set the stage for the class lecture, which included insights about a pro-environment attitude-behavior gap (Cavender, et al., 2019). The students confirmed that, collectively, they possess attitude behavior gaps, with 92.5% of them agreeing to the statement: "I try to be a green consumer wherever I can; sometimes I do better than other times, but I can do better." The students (51 fashion, 18 hospitality, 11 other majors) identified a number of "key influences" on their buying behaviors, with "price" being "first priority" for 40% and only 13% reporting "ethics/sustainability" a first priority influence. Other influences included family, social media, and peer pressure – all of which were helpful responses for discussing the underlying concepts of consumer sovereignty and pro-environment attitude behavior gap.

<u>Evaluation</u>

Overall, students were engaged in the lesson, evidenced by an overwhelming majority who participated in the pre-module online survey (81.6%, n = 92). Furthermore, 61.2% (n = 59) of the students

who viewed the online learning module provided feedback through an evaluation. The concept of consumer sovereignty was effectively communicated based on feedback such as the following quotes:

> *I really liked how (the instructor) made personal connections when talking about what the consumer does. Such as when she discussed the things collectively done related to food ...the use disposable cups, plates, straws. It helped me connect my own personal experiences as a consumer and think of the things I do.*

and

> *The instructor very clearly defined topics such as different types of power and consumer information sources. Also gave good examples of how to be a good leader in workplace for CSR.*

A 20-point quiz given to students also indicated effective communication of the lesson based on the average score of 92% (numeric scores ranged from 12 – 20).

The post-teaching survey responses that were provided by students suggested compelling and engaging online learning experiences. Students provided comments such as:

> *(the instructor) connected with the viewer and giving out examples that can be related to them.*

and

> *I liked that she discussed survey answers for our class and could relate everything back.*

In conclusion, the objectives for the module were met, based on student feedback and quiz scores, and the use of an online survey to convey students' own behavior to the course concepts were well received and effective.

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