

Will Consumers Buy Golden Fiber Couture?

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Introduction: With the rise of the sustainability issue in the textile industry (Amindoust & Saghafinia, 2017), businesses are trying to economically sustain by reducing their negative impact on the planet and people (Caniato et al., 2012; Pandey et al., 2020). Features such as biodegradability, eco-friendliness, and affordability depict jute (also known as golden fiber) as one of the best sustainable natural fibers (Adekomaya et al., 2016; Shahinur et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Jute has been popular for making bags, sacks, and rugs, for its superior strength, high tenacity, and low cost (Debnath et al., 2009; Ivanovska et al., 2020; Mahmud, 2018; Thakur et al., 2021). However, the applications are limited to non-apparel areas mostly because of its meshy structure, stiffness, and poor elasticity due to the presence of lignin in its structure (Ammayappan et al., 2013; Nath et al., 2021). Researchers have tried different ways such as blending jute with other fibers (Bhardwaj & Juneja, 2012; Charankar et al., 2007; Ibrahim et al., 2009) and different types of finishing (Ammayappan et al., 2013; Pan et al., 2017; Sreenath et al., 1996) to use jute in diversified ways (Gokarneshan et al., 2019) to produce apparel from it. However, there is a lack of research addressing consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions of jute-blended garments. To fill this research gap, the purpose of this study is to examine and understand how consumers perceive the Functional (fit and comfort), Expressive (environmental friendliness and uniqueness), and Aesthetic (aesthetic quality) factors of jute-blended garments and to investigate how these perceptions influence consumers' attitudes, which in turn influence their purchase intentions towards it. Moreover, it aims to examine the influence of consumers' subjective norms toward jute-blended garments.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development: The Functional, Expressive, and Aesthetic (FEA) consumer needs model by Lamb and Kallal (1992) shows that consumers evaluate new garments in terms of their functionality, expressiveness, and aesthetics to form attitudes toward them. The current study employed this model to examine and understand consumers' FEA perceptions of jute-blended garments and how these perceptions influence their attitudes toward jute-blended garments. The FEA model is helpful to evaluate the suitability of new apparel products to plan, develop, merchandise, and present a product line based on FEA perspectives (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). In addition, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) is used in the current study to explain how that attitude toward jute-blended garments along with their subjective norms assist in forming their purchase intention. This explains the psychological cognitive processes (Lee & Chow, 2020) behind a certain behavior (Hasan, 2021) that are influenced by their attitude and the way their subjective norms affect their thought patterns (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Based on the extant literature, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Consumers' perceived functional attributes of jute blend garments, in terms of (a) perceived fit and (b) perceived comfort, positively influence their attitudes toward jute-blended garments.

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H2: Consumers' perceived expressive attributes of jute-blended garments, in terms of a) environment-friendliness and b) perceived uniqueness, positively influence their attitude toward jute-blended garments.

H3: Consumers' perceived aesthetic attributes of jute-blended garments positively influence their attitudes toward jute-blended garments.

H4: Consumers' attitude toward jute-blended garments positively influences their purchase intention towards jute-blended garments.

H5: Consumers' subjective norms positively influence their purchase intention toward jute-blended garments.

Methods and Data Analysis: A survey was designed and administered through Qualtrics by modifying previously developed 5-point Likert-type scales and one semantic-differential scale to measure research variables. Undergraduate students from the College of Human Sciences of a southeastern university were invited to participate in the study. Participants took the survey in person to receive extra credit. They read the description of jute-blended garments, saw the images, watched a brief video of the jute fiber production, touched, and felt the fabric swatches, and looked at the jute-blended garments on the dress form before answering the survey questions. Demographic information was also collected. SPSS was used to analyze the data.

Results: A total of 148 students participated in this survey which met the desired sample size criteria of the study according to the sample-to-variable ratio (Hair et al., 2018). The average age of participants was 20 years (female 93.9%, male 4.7%). Most respondents were Non-Hispanic White (83.1%) and were juniors (35.1%) followed by sophomores (29.7%). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to check the dimensionality of the items and found all the items were above 0.70 factor loading except one item from the fit variable. Cronbach's α for each factor was .7 or above, which ensured internal consistency and reliability for each factor. Pearson correlation coefficients among variables showed that the variables are significantly correlated without an issue of multicollinearity.

Multiple regression was conducted to test H1-H5. Results showed that consumers' perceived functional attributes of jute blend garments, in terms of both perceived fit ($\beta = .151, p = 0.043$) and perceived comfort ($\beta = .260, p < .001$), consumers' perceived expressional attributes of jute blend garments in terms of both perceived environment-friendliness ($\beta = .156, p = 0.025$) and the perceived uniqueness ($\beta = .159, p = 0.027$) and consumers' perceived aesthetic attributes of jute-blended garments ($\beta = .293, p < .001$) influenced their attitude toward jute-blended garments significantly ($R^2 = 0.470$). The findings indicated a significant influence of consumers' attitudes towards jute-blended garments ($\beta = .291, p < .001$) on their purchase intention, and consumers' subjective norms also positively influenced their purchase intention toward jute-blended garments ($\beta = .436, p < .001$) ($R^2 = 0.427$). Thus, all hypotheses were supported.

Conclusion and Implications: This study is the first one that investigated consumers' purchase intention toward jute-blended garments, which are considered to be sustainable. The incorporation of the FEA perspective with TRA can serve as a great model to understand consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions toward newly developed jute-blended garments.

This can contribute to both theories' existing literature by extending the application of the theories to understanding consumers' evaluation of jute-blended garments. Fashion designers and manufacturers can utilize consumers' FEA preferences for jute-blended garments to create an appeal among consumers and to form a positive attitude towards the product. The present study has a few limitations (e.g., convenience student sample).

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Note: Other references are available upon request.