

## Male Consumer Perception of Apparel Quality in an Era of Sustainable Fashion Industry

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### Background

The shift towards sustainability in the fashion industry has prompted male and female consumers to demand more greener products and reevaluate their criteria for assessing apparel quality (Kumar et al., 2020). Product quality matters in re-enforcing green behaviors (Zhang, 2022), as perceived apparel quality has a direct relationship with purchase intention in general (Asshidin et al., 2015). A study suggests that gender plays an important role in an individual's motivation and buying intentions for green apparel due to differences in how men and women perceive information (Kumar & Yadav, 2021). According to a study, educating men about fashion issues is essential to enhance their fashion awareness and responsiveness, this would help male customers, who are mostly influenced by interpersonal effects, to assert their own fashion values and increase their status consumption (Lertwannawit & Mandhachitara, 2012; Sandes, 2022). Given that understanding, male consumer behavior regarding apparel quality and sustainability represents a fundamental area of study, unfortunately, however, there is limited research made on men's consumer perception of apparel quality in an era of a sustainable fashion industry. However, when discussing sustainable consumption, addressing such a pressing issue in our society can benefit everyone, regardless of gender (Bloodhart & Swim, 2020). Thus, this study aims to explore male consumers' interest and attitude toward sustainable apparel, which in turn influences their willingness to pay more for sustainable apparel as an investment in quality and durability.

### Perceived Apparel Quality and Its Conceptualization

Perceived quality is defined as "the consumer's judgment of a product's overall excellence or superiority." (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 3). When it comes to apparel quality, the definition includes garment durability, performance, construction, material, and fabric hand (Kim, 2010). To consumers, product quality during pre-purchase in the apparel and wearable industry is determined by various factors such as brand, price, store image, advertisement, appearance, and country of origin (Kalicharan, 2014). Moreover, a study identified the important factors that contribute to the perceived quality of clothing based on a literature review (Aakko & Niinimaki, 2021). These factors include brand image and reputation, price as an indicator of quality, sustainability as an ethical and environmental indicator of quality, product materials, construction, color, finishing and durability, aesthetic, functionality and fit, ease of care, and sensory and emotional experience (Aakko & Niinimaki, 2021).

### Gender Disparity on the Perception of Apparel Product Attributes

Recent research suggests that women place more importance on price, sustainability, and longevity of clothing than men do (Baier et al., 2020). Furthermore, for both genders, factors

such as appearance, comfort, and quality are still more relevant when compared to sustainable and ethical products (Baier et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Rausch et al. (2021) also found that, for consumers, fit, comfort, price, quality, and design are crucial factors when purchasing clothes. In comparison to the previous factors, the most important attribute when it comes to sustainable clothing includes fair wages and working conditions for the workers involved in production, as well as an environmentally friendly manufacturing process (de Oliveira et al., 2022). Moreover, the durability of the garment plays a crucial role in the consumer's decision-making process (SGSCorp, 2021). Customers generally prefer sturdy, long-lasting clothing that can be repaired if necessary. In addition, sustainable components may be anticipated by the general consumers as classic, timeless styles rather than trendy or fashion-forward designs (de Klerk, 2021). Sustainable consumption literature has focused on durability and classic styles rather than approaching the overall apparel quality perception. From the apparel quality perception perspective, the durability of a garment is a major facet contributing to the overall apparel quality (e.g., Kim, 2010). Therefore, it is plausible to anticipate that sustainable garments may be considered as quality garments. In addition, sustainable components may be anticipated by the general consumers as a part of the overall perception of apparel quality.

### **Importance of Understanding Male Consumer's Apparel Quality Perception**

In recent years, men's clothing consumption has increased significantly and is expected to grow at a faster rate than women's clothing over the next four years (Miller, 2023). This implies that male consumers are spending more money on apparel. When it comes to sustainable apparel, men and women are motivated differently. For men, their cognitive involvement played a crucial role in determining their intention to buy and identify with eco-friendly apparel (Tung et al., 2017). Based on these findings, when targeting male consumers, it would be wise to use rational narratives and reasoning to help them understand the value and importance of sustainable apparel. Men are more likely to be motivated by functional performance and product information (Tung et al., 2017). Moreover, based on the findings of the Business of Sustainability Index report by PDI Technologies (2023), it is revealed that 68% of U.S. citizens are willing to pay a higher price for eco-friendly products when compared to non-sustainable alternatives. Therefore, it is critical to understand the male consumer's perception of apparel quality with an emphasis of the sustainable product attributes.

### **Future Research**

Therefore, based on the literature review, this study suggests that future research should be conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the processes behind the selection and purchase of eco-friendly apparel by male consumers. It is recommended that researchers explore different nations due to variations in gender roles and gender-specific values across societies, as well as for cultural factors that could offer more effective and generalizable findings. In addition, further research should be conducted on how men perceive the quality of clothing across different categories of products. There is currently a lack of research on the subject, so it is necessary to better investigate male consumer behavior and their perception of apparel quality. Future research could also benefit from utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research approaches through experimental designs or a mixed-method research design to provide significant insights.

Furthermore, to guide future studies, two research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Are men willing to pay more for sustainable apparel as an investment in quality and durability, compared to non-sustainable apparel?

RQ2: Can effective communication of durability and sustainability influence male consumers' perception of value for money?

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