

## Application of GAPS Model to Improve Textile and Apparel Industry's Sustainable Practices

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**Background:** Recently, sustainable development and environmental issues have received significant attention from all over the world. In the apparel context, apparel companies (e.g., Nike, Patagonia) and consumers are expressing their heightened interest in sustainable practices and are coming forward to put efforts toward sustainable apparel production and green consumption (Yoo, Divita, & Kim, 2013). Few companies have come together by forming a Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) to bring more transparency in the textile and apparel system wide supply chain. However, there seems to be a disconnect between the textile and apparel industry (TAI) practices and consumer needs related to sustainability. Consumers may not be fully aware of TAI's sustainable practices and may have difficulty in finding the sustainable fashion apparel. To address these issues of disconnect between TAI and consumers, with a goal of meeting consumers' sustainability needs carried out by TAI, in the present conceptual study, the GAPS model (Levy, Weitz, & Grewal, 2014) for improving retail customer service quality will be applied to analyze the TAI's sustainable practices.

**GAPS Model in Service Quality:** Levy et al. (2014) summarized the four service quality gaps as observed in service industries: 1) knowledge (i.e., the difference between customers' expectation and a firm's perception of those expectation), 2) standards (i.e., the difference between a firm's knowledge of customers' perceptions expectations and service quality standards), 3) delivery (i.e., the difference between service standards of a firm and the actual delivered service to customers), and 4) communication gaps (i.e., the difference between service offered by a firm to customers and the service a firm's promotion program communicates) (Levy et al., 2014; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). This model is successfully applied in most service industries such as medical service, hospitality, retail, and transportation.

**TAI Sustainability:** Sustainability efforts in TAI, can be broadly classified into three major pillars: people (i.e., personnel such as garment workers, apparel industry professionals, and consumers), profit (i.e., economic viability) and planet (i.e., environmental impact of the apparel industry) (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2015). We propose to adopt the GAPS model to evaluate and improve sustainability in TAI. Below are some of the ways the GAPS model can be applied in the TAI sustainability context.

### **GAPS Model in TAI Sustainability:**

**Gap1: knowledge gap-** Previous research has studied consumers' attitudes and knowledge toward sustainable consumption and results showed that consumers tended to use sustainable apparel if they were stylish (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012), manufactured in sweatshop-free facilities, and by paying fair wages to the workers. Firms unaware of customers' such expectations, would not be able to meet them. Therefore, to fill the knowledge gap, TAI

firms need to do a better job at conducting consumer research to understand their needs and expectations.

**Gap2: standards gap-** Firms set standards which are mainly regulated by organizations such as Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), but enough consideration has not been given to customers' needs and expectations while outlining such standards. Therefore based on the insights gained from filling the knowledge gap, firms need to set standards. For example, TAI firms should develop strict standards in terms of their sustainable manufacturing practices (e.g., fair wages not just minimum wages, energy and water conservation, etc.).

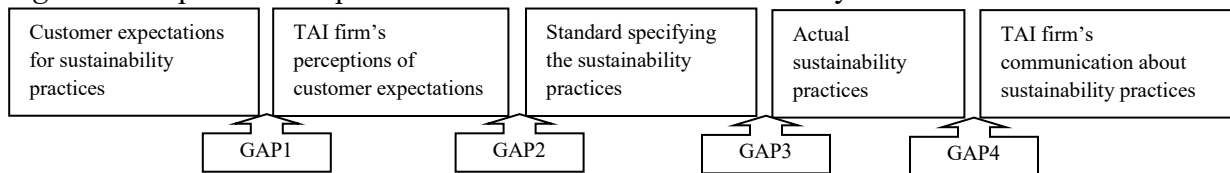
**Gap3: delivery gap-** Even though standards (e.g., use of organic materials, less water, less harmful chemicals, pay fair wages to workers, etc.) are established to guide the firms, standards may not be followed and executed with compliance. Some barriers exist for firms such as incompatibility between sustainability and financial aspects (Perera & Putt del Pino, 2013). TAI firms should fill this delivery gap by acting in full compliance with standards.

**Gap4: communication gap-** There exists a gap between what firms communicate in terms of their sustainable practices through their promotional programs and their actual practice. Some firms are successful in filling this communication gap. For example, Eileen Fisher and other sustainable brands report their sustainable practices on their websites and other channels. Other TAI firms can do the same.

### Proposal for Future Action:

Drawing extant literature on service quality GAPS model and the TAI sustainability practices, we propose a conceptual model (see Figure 1). This model will be tested to analyze the sustainable practices of TAI firms. A quantitative survey will be developed asking specific questions related to each of the four gaps to TAI managers. Results will lead us to identify the GAPS and suggest intervention programs for TAI firms to be successful in implementing sustainability practices.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual GAPS model in TAI sustainability context



### Key References: (Other reference available upon request)

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