



Exploratory analysis of sustainability involvements among the apparel companies affiliated with
Sustainable Apparel Coalition

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Keywords: Apparel industry, environment, sustainability, sustainable apparel coalition

Apparel industry contributes significantly to the amount of pollution and ecological hazards through the manufacturing of yarns, fabrics and apparel in ways that use a considerable amount of non-renewable energy, harmful chemicals and natural resources, thus contributing to environmental degradation (Hethorn & Ulasewiz, 2008). To address plaguing sustainability concerns apparel manufacturers are increasingly introducing sustainable products that support social and environmental initiatives as well as consumer demands for the same are on a steep rise (Ratneshwar & Mick, 2005). Little is known from a research perspective of different sustainable strategies that the apparel industry devises. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the industry's sustainability initiatives. The results of this study would aid future scholarship in academia and help us align academic research with the practical implications of the industry.

Among the diverse apparel firms in terms of their operation, the researchers purposefully chose the limited sample of the companies that were the members of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC). These companies are currently involved in several aspects of sustainability and actively promote their sustainability involvements to other stakeholders through their websites. The industry sample involved various stakeholders in an apparel supply chain like brands, retailers, suppliers and industry affiliates. This study was content-analyzed the information of sustainability initiatives under the sustainability or social responsibility tab of industry partners' websites. This approach was purposefully chosen for the easy information access and maintaining a common unit of analysis because all companies did not have annual sustainability reports on their websites.

The primary triple bottom line (TBL) dimensions of the industry partners' sustainable strategies were based on "Environment-Planet" and "Social-People." Primary themes under the "planet" category included such as energy efficiency, reduced water usage, use of no or less toxic chemicals or pollutants, use of high quality raw materials that are durable so that it can last for a long time, and emphasis on concept of reduce and recycle. Additionally, the companies were also involved in reducing their use of office stationery, using recycled paper products, online statements and online ordering systems, which would eventually assist the companies to reduce paper wastage and their overall carbon footprint. Product innovations were also a big part in this dimension wherein innovative and high-tech raw materials were incorporated in product development. Major themes under the "people" dimension concentrated on charity or donation either through money or volunteer time of employees, supporting various environmental and social causes, indulging in fair trade practices and developing a code of conduct for suppliers. The economic dimension was largely ignored and was not explicitly stated on industry websites.

An interesting trend in the strategies on social dimension was that retailers and brands indulged in donation, charity or volunteerism for specific causes (e.g., breast cancer awareness, saving wildlife, rainforest alliance). However, suppliers for a large part promoted (a) education among underrepresented population in the society and (b) development of poorly maintained neighborhoods. For instance, Arvind mills had trust that funded projects for vocational training for poor individuals in rural areas as well as establishing the "Strategic Help Alliance for Relief to Distressed Areas" (SHARDA) with an objective to improve the quality of life of urban poor people anywhere in India. This could be due to the fact that the majority of suppliers are in the developing countries, where poverty and illiteracy formed a large in their society. Thus, by devising social initiatives these SAC affiliated companies helped increase the life quality of the underprivileged people. Increased emphasis on research studies pertaining to social well-being could be due to the increased awareness of working conditions in apparel factories (e.g., controversy of NIKE sweatshop labor in late 1990's with increased advocacy from student activists and non-governmental organizations).

Another interesting finding was that 13 out of 32 SAC affiliated companies belonged to the outdoor or sportswear industry (e.g., Patagonia, Timberland, Nike, Asics, New Balance). Consumers of these brands are highly involved in outdoor activities so they pretty much have direct contacts with nature. They could be more inclined towards having higher degrees of environmental concerns than other consumer segments because of more close attachment with nature. Economic dimension was not explicitly communicated to the stakeholders compared with other dimensions and it was difficult to interpret this dimension because industries only provided an inclusive definition of sustainability.

Overall, this study provides important insights about how apparel industry has embraced the concept of sustainability. The study provided rich information about the various sustainability initiatives the companies were involved in. The industry's sustainability initiatives primarily addressed the "Environment-Planet" TBL dimension. There was an array of strategies that minimized the impact of their products and processes on the environment. The results also showed that companies concentrated their strategies towards reducing their impact on the environment, saving and regenerating natural resources, focusing on product innovation through using innovative raw materials, being efficient in processes and working towards being more resourceful in aspects that could directly harm the environment. Although strategies focusing on social well-being were considerable, it did not surpass the environmental strategies. The study provides new directions for future research in our discipline. Sustainability related scholarship would help us align with the industry's involvements for holistic solutions. The generalizability of this study's findings is limited as it considered only at sustainability involvements among the SAC affiliated companies. Future research is needed with the companies beyond the SAC affiliated ones.

References

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