



Exploration of the Environmentally Sustainable Apparel Purchase Decision-Making Process

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Background and Purpose. Although the body of scholarship focused on environmental sustainability (ES) and the apparel and textile industry is ever expanding, there remains a paucity of literature on understanding the decision process consumers engage in when acquiring ES apparel. Research that does detail aspects of the apparel-purchase decision process typically focuses on a specific market segment such as wheelchair-bound apparel consumers (O'Bannon et al., 1988) or consumers of innovative apparel products (Ko et al., 2009). Narrowing in on the sustainable apparel-purchase decision process, very few studies exist. A study by Dickson and Littrell (1997) identified evaluative criteria used by consumers of alternative trade organizations and concluded that these individuals drew on quality criteria in their decision-making process to a significantly greater degree compared to non-ATO consumers. However, the primary objective of Dickson and Littrell was not to understand or model the ES apparel-purchase decision process. In fact, no research published to date has examined this process as the primary study objective.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to: (1) begin an exploration of the ES apparel purchase decision-making process and (2) compare that process to a more traditional process. Framing the study is Blackwell et al.'s (2005) consumer decision process (CDP) model which conceptualizes consumer decision making as occurring through seven stages: (a) need recognition, (b) search for information, (c) evaluation of alternatives, (d) purchase, (e) consumption, (f) post-consumption evaluation, and (g) divestment.

Method. Due to the limited research related to the topic, this study used a qualitative approach and collected data through semi-structured interviews with 26 individuals (nine men and 17 women). The participants were asked to describe a recent experience they had purchasing an article of clothing that they felt was ES and how they came to make the purchase decision. Follow-up questions included: "What motivated the purchase?", "While you were shopping did you consider other alternatives before making your final purchase?", and "Would you say that the process of purchasing this most recent garment was typical of how you buy most of your clothing?" The interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Data analysis occurred through a standard qualitative process of coding the data, synthesizing the codes into broader concepts and themes, and interpreting the results.

Findings. Data gathered indicate that when purchasing ES apparel, the participants in the study worked through several stages prior to making a purchase decision. The process began with the participants recognizing and then defining an apparel need. The next stages were search for information and evaluation of alternatives. The participants repeated these stages twice—first to decide the source for acquiring the ES apparel product and then to determine which ES product to select. After selecting a product that best meets the apparel need, the penultimate

stage in participants' ES decision-making process was reassessing their need. Finally, the process concluded with a decision to either purchase, or not purchase, the garment.

In addition to identifying the stages of an ES apparel-purchase decision process, the data also revealed several key ways that an ES apparel decision-making process may differ from the more traditional CDP model. First, apparel consumers aiming to be ES evaluate a range of sources for their apparel including second-hand, mainstream, and eco-conscious. Second, in addition to evaluating apparel alternatives based on physical attributes (color, form, price) and relational characteristics (comfort, fit), in making an ES apparel purchase decision, consumers consider environmental impact and select a product that best balances ES with other purchase criteria. Finally, the ES apparel-purchase decision process commonly involves a reassessment of apparel need immediately before making a final decision to, or not to, purchase the apparel, a step that is absent within the CDP model

Implications and Conclusions. This study provides initial evidence that aspects of the ES apparel purchase decision-making process vary from more general consumer decision processes. If this finding is confirmed through extended data collection with a more generalizable sample, retailers selling ES apparel could use this information to aid in the development of appropriate marketing strategies. For example, knowing that ES consumers actively search for information about sources for ES apparel, retailers can better promote their company as being ES. Furthermore, this study suggests that ES apparel consumers may search for information to help them evaluate the environmental preferability of different garment alternatives. Retailers wanting to attract and gain the loyalty of ER consumers need to increase the depth of garment information provided. Retailers could aid consumers' evaluation of alternatives by chronicling information about a garment such as the manufacturing processes involved in its production, the different countries to which the garment traveled from design to delivery, and its total carbon footprint. This, and similar information, would greatly improve consumers' ability to evaluate the environmental preferability of different garments and aid their efforts to acquire environmentally sustainable apparel.

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