



A typology of consumers' familiarity and experience of organic cotton apparel

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**Introduction** In recent years, people have been increasingly motivated by ethical consumption and accordingly, products featuring environmental claims have obtained unprecedented popularity in various retail sectors. The apparel industry is no exception, offering a variety of environmentally friendly products to satisfy the preferences of socially responsible consumers. Among these, one of the most representative and popular products could be apparel made with organic cotton which is grown under sustainable farming practices (Lin, 2010). However, it is reported that familiarity with organic cotton is considerably low among consumers (Ha-Brookshire & Norum, 2012). This could be problematic, especially to organic cotton product retailers, because familiarity or perceived knowledge is an essential factor in consumers' decision-making process (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). In order to provide a clear overview about the influence of product familiarity on consumers, this study developed a typology of consumers based on familiarity level with organic cotton and identified differences among subgroups in their purchase behavior.

**Literature Review** Familiarity: Product familiarity has become a major interest of researchers and many studies have examined this variable to explain its effect on a number of consumer-related behaviors including product evaluation (Raju, 1977), purchase intention (Park & Stoel, 2005), and satisfaction (Söderlund, 2002). In terms of consumers' familiarity related to sustainable cotton products, according to a recent study, learning opportunities on sustainable cotton increased participants' knowledge and positive attitudes toward the products (Ha-Brookshire & Norum, 2011). Experience: Past experience with the product is known to be closely related to familiarity. Past product-related experience is a critical predictor of later behavior and purchase intention (Pollard, Kirk, & Cade, 2002).

**Methods** Data were collected using a web-based survey with 200 female South Korean residents over 18 years of age. A self-administered questionnaire employing previously established measures was used for the study. Cluster analysis was employed to classify participants based on their familiarity level and experience with organic cotton. In addition, ANOVA tested the predictive validity of the cluster solution.

**Results** A three cluster solution was suggested by the result:

1) Unfamiliar: This group was the largest among the three clusters (45.5%). The majority of people in this group had never heard of or had heard of, but was unfamiliar with organic cotton and had very little experience purchasing organic cotton apparel. 2) Moderately familiar: This group was the smallest among the three clusters (25%). People from this group were fairly

familiar with organic cotton but had little experience purchasing organic cotton apparel. 3) Highly familiar: This group consists of 29.5% of the sample and is familiar with the concept of organic cotton and the ethical issues underlying it. People from this group had several experiences purchasing organic cotton apparel.

The result of ANOVA showed that there were significant differences in purchase intention ( $F=4.213$ ,  $p=.02$ ), willingness to pay more for organic cotton apparel ( $F=8.79$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and purchase experience of other organic products such as food and cosmetic/skin care products ( $F=12.77$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Tukey's HSD post hoc test indicated that the highly familiar group had higher purchase intention and was willing to pay more for organic cotton apparel and also had more experience of other organic products than the other two groups. Further regression analysis using product familiarity as a dependent variable showed that people who have higher income level and more children under the age of 6 in the household were more familiar with organic cotton. Education level and age did not have significant associations with the familiarity level.

**Discussion & Implications** When classifying consumers based on their familiarity with organic cotton, there was a significant difference in purchase behavior among groups. Therefore, it would be essential for retailers to enhance consumers' familiarity and experience with the product. However, slightly less than half (45.5%) of our sample was unfamiliar with organic cotton which was similar to what Ha-Brookshire and Norum (2011) found in their study on sustainable cotton. The findings from the two studies directly show the prevalence of lack of consumers' knowledge on organic cotton. As more than half of the world's apparel consumption involves cotton and demand for sustainable cotton is increasing (Ha-Brookshire & Norum, 2011), consumer education on this matter is needed.

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