

Generation Y's attitudes towards apparel labeled with organic, recycled and fair trade

Chanmi Gloria Hwang and Young-A Lee
Iowa State University, USA

Keywords: Apparel, corporate social responsibility, generation Y, sustainability

Generation Y (Gen Y), a large and powerful consumer segment with a long future of potential consumer decisions, is now entering young adulthood (Lee & Hill, 2012). This generation has a considerable buying power that grabs the attention of apparel companies promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR)—the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its activities on society, the environment and its own prosperity. However, Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011) states that Gen Y consumers are skeptical about labels and promotional CSR messages than previous generations. This may mean these consumers look for products with CSR activities when perceiving the activities to be reasonable and authentic.

Previous research suggests that various levels of consumers' CSR knowledge would lead to the different socially responsible behaviors of these consumers (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001). Information and/or certification of CSR activities can be communicated with consumers through CSR logos and labels attached to products. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine a consumer's level of knowledge and attitudes towards the three different types of CSR initiatives: apparel made (a) of organic materials, (b) with a fair trade label, and (c) of recycled materials.

An online survey including both open and close-ended questions was conducted with a convenience sample of college students at one of the U.S. mid-western universities. The survey questionnaire consisted of demographic information as well as several open-ended questions, starting with asking each participant's definitions of apparel made (a) of organic materials, (b) with fair trade label, and (c) of recycled materials. Right after each participant's responses to the above questions, the example labels with the logos and descriptions of each CSR initiative were presented so they would have better understanding of the terms (see Figure 1). Their opinions and attitudes were then asked for these products.



Figure 1. Visual images with the logos and descriptions of each CSR initiative.

Among 510 survey responses, a total of 442 useable surveys were used for data analysis. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0 software was used to analyze the descriptive statistics of participant characteristics. Participant's ages ranged from 18 to 33 with

the mean age of 22. About 70% of the participants were females and 30% were males. The majority was White/European American (80%) followed by Asian (12%) and others (8%).

For a holistic analysis of open-ended questions, a process of "seeking pattern in meaning" by Spiggle (1994) was used to search for major themes across the discussions of each CSR initiatives. Three themes, possibly adding the most insights on the relationships between the respondents and CSR activities, were derived to: 1) Complaints about accessibility and higher price of these products, 2) more positive attitudes towards fair trade over organic initiatives, and 3) skepticism on CSR activities.

The results of this study show that the students have better understanding for the terms of organic (e.g., "eco-friendly" [P87], "no pesticides" [P144]) and recycled materials (e.g., "post-consumer reused materials" [P15]) over fair trade label. About 20% did not know or never heard of fair trade before participating in this study (e.g., "I'm not aware of them" [P114]). The overall order of importance among three CSR initiatives was fair trade followed by recycled, and organic. The results indicated that about 40% of the participants complained about accessibility and higher price over these products (e.g., "I will probably select them if they are readily available" [P14], "... they are more expensive." [P87]). About 21% preferred fair trade over organic. Some students presented their skepticism on organic stating "unlike other products, it is way overrated and not truly helping people" [P69]. About 10% of them were skeptical about overall CSR initiatives stating, "not regulated well, and another schemes to sell products" [P46] and "misleading and untrustworthy" [P71].

The results shows that it is important to provide further promotions of these products labeled with organic, recycled and fair trade so Gen Y can easily access this information, which will provide clear understanding of their CSR initiatives and further shape their attitudes towards purchasing these products in a long run. The apparel industry should pay more attention towards developing fair trade apparel products and promote them since this initiative has more preference among the young consumers than others. This study also proves that the young consumers are seeking more of ethical values that help people rather than overrated terms of organic or recycled. Future research is needed to emphasize on the way effectively marketing fair trade products to Gen Y as ethical consumers. Another research without providing the visual images of CSR initiatives also needs to be conducted for comparing the results with this study.

References

- Bhaduri, G., & Ha-Brookshire, J. E. (2011). Do transparent business practices pay? Exploration of transparency and consumer purchase intention. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 29(2), 135-149.
- Lee, H. H., & Hill, J. (2012). Young Generation Y consumers' perceptions of sustainability in the apparel industry. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 16(4), 477-491.
- Mohr, L. A., Webb, D. J., & Harris, K. E. (2001). Do consumers expect companies to be socially responsible? The impact of corporate social responsibility on buying behavior. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 35(1), 45-72.
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 491-503.