



Exploring Individuals' Moral Value Conflicts as a Result of Corporate Sustainability

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As the textile and apparel supply chain has become increasingly fractured across the world and across corporations in recent decades (Dicken, 2015), questions of social responsibility have increased from both consumers and researchers. Workers' conditions, fair wages, and the environmental impacts of production and transportation cause concern for many (Dicken, 2015; Park & Dickson, 2008), all of which stem from the overall sustainability of a supply chain, from material selection to production location to retailer to end consumer. Sustainability goals and activities can be just as fractured as the supply chain, further complicating any understanding of corporate sustainability or responsibility for employees or consumers (Ha-Brookshire, 2015).

Ha-Brookshire (2015) argues that for a supply chain to be truly sustainable, all members therein must adhere to common sustainability principles that stem from an assumed moral responsibility held by a corporation. These beliefs can range anywhere between two extremes along a morality spectrum, from perfect (or absolute) to imperfect (or meritorious) duties. A similar morality spectrum is expected from individuals, with varying degrees of intensity as regards beliefs of moral responsibility for both consumers and employees. That is, morally responsible consumers may be employees of less responsible corporations and vice versa. Considering employment is one form of social contract between employees and employers (Dunfee, 1991) and that employees are also consumers of goods produced by corporations, it is important to understand how contracts are viewed and negotiated when disparities exist. Conflicting norms can cause difficulty in an individual's compliance with a social contract unless a means of prioritization is discovered (Dunfee, 1991). Thus, the study was designed to explore (a) if there are ranges in moral values that individuals perceive toward corporate sustainability and (b) if individuals experience moral value conflicts between their consumer and employee identities.

To explore these research questions, the researchers performed qualitative research using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Once the Institutional Review Board approved the study, the primary researcher interviewed 9 textile and apparel professionals in 2016, with 3 to 20 years of experience, currently performing merchandising, technical design, product development, sustainability, retail management, and textile science roles in NY, MA, CA, PA, and MO. Two participants were male, the remaining were female. Interviews were conducted via Facetime or Skype, except for one via telephone and one face-to-face meeting. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. The data were then transcribed by the primary researcher and analyzed for major recurring themes by both researchers.

The resulting cases showed varying degrees of intensity toward moral duty for sustainability in consumer and employee identities. 3 out of 9 participants showed the case of a *strongly dutiful*

consumer and employee as Tara stated that she is “at a point where I don’t want to buy new.” In this light, she, as a materials researcher, makes sure that she finds “every ally within that business” to accomplish her sustainability goals. Her social contract with her employer appeared to be a deliberate attempt to make her identity consistent in personal and professional settings. The second case (2 of 9) demonstrated a *weakly dutiful consumer and employee* as Jill, a merchandise planner, said, shopping is “all about aesthetics” to her and it “would be icing on the cake” to work for a sustainably-focused company, but she wouldn’t “go work for the company because of that.” Conflicting values seemed to rarely affect her social contract with employers. The third case (1 of 9) demonstrated a *strongly dutiful consumer, yet weakly dutiful employee*. Leah, a technical designer, stated that, as a consumer, “I always try, instead of going to Amazon to buy for \$10, I’d rather go to [local shop] and buy it for \$15.” However, as an employee, she thinks corporate sustainability is “not the reality of the industry,” therefore, she attempts to reconcile this conflict by stating, you “have to go where you can...to gain the experience to move on.” The fourth case (1 of 9) demonstrated a *weakly dutiful consumer, yet strongly dutiful employee* with Pam, an associate buyer, stating, “if I need something now, I’m just buying it” without considering how it was made. However, she is a charity campaign leader at work and was actively looking for a new employer with “more social responsibility.” Her consumer and employee identities conflicted and she attempted to reconcile by stating, “I go to thrift stores all the time,” but not because it is sustainable, “it’s for aesthetics.” The remaining cases (2 of 9) lay somewhere between the strongly dutiful and the weakly dutiful cases.

The study showed that there may be varying degrees of perceived moral values toward corporate sustainability along the morality spectrum and individuals may experience moral value conflicts between personal and employee identities. Specifically, the study showed two cases, Pam and Leah, who are currently reconciling such moral value conflicts. Moreover, given that 3 other participants shared that they had to change jobs a few times to be in places where their personal and corporate values toward sustainability were consistent, continued study could identify more people who have had to reconcile their moral values in the past. As such, further research is recommended to test the study’s findings using quantitative methods. These findings would benefit from a larger, more representative sample and help gain additional insight into moral value conflicts that individuals may experience in their consumer and employee identities.

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